

Ukrop's invests \$1 million, expands grilled chicken to 500 Kroger stores

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Chris Kantner, Bobby Ukrop, Tom Sturgeon and Stephen Melton are the executive team behind the Ukrop's grilled chicken expansion.

Ukrop's is upping its grilled chicken game.

Over the past year, Ukrop's has invested \$1 million into its chicken facility in Chesterfield. Now Ukrop's grilled chicken has been picked up by Kroger and can be found in over 500 Kroger locations east of the Mississippi.

"It's a breakthrough opportunity for us," Bobby Ukrop, CEO, said. Ukrop's White House rolls, cinnamon crumb cake and mini pies can already be found in Kroger stores nationwide. "We make over 150 products every day," Chris Kantner, president of Ukrop's Homestyle Foods, said. Ukrop's makes everything from its iconic rainbow cookies and chocolate fudge pie to potato salad, pasta salad and entrees. But its two most popular items to date are the grilled chicken and chicken salad.



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"We had to ask ourselves, what do we want to grow nationwide?" Kantner said.

"We think our chicken is fantastic," Kantner added. "And we have a lot of uses for it, whether it's chicken breast, grilled chicken, chicken salad — we do a lot of chicken. We want to continue to expand chicken nationwide."

Ukrop's Homestyle Foods have become a beloved brand well-known to the Richmond and Central Virginia region. The brand was founded and launched in 2010 after Ukrop's sold its grocery stores. In 2017, major grocery stores in Central Virginia such as Kroger, Harris Teeter, Food Lion, Wegman's and Publix began carrying a large line-up of Ukrop's Homestyle Foods from the bakery to the refrigerated section. Since 2022, Ukrop's has been expanding its products nationwide, with Kroger picking up the cinnamon crumb cake, mini pies and White House rolls. Now, the grilled chicken is looking to join Ukrop's expanded line-up.

The grilled chicken is made at the Ukrop's Kitchen facility on Southlake Boulevard in Chesterfield. The Ukrop's Kitchen opened in 1989. It's where Ukrop's makes its prepared meals, as well as its salads and sandwiches. The Ukrop's kitchen is a hive of activity, 24 hours a day, five and a half days a week. The facility employs 200 people and occupies over 44,000 square feet.



A Ukrop's employee packs chicken and bacon Cobb salads at the Ukrop's Kitchen in Chesterfield.

Over the past year, Ukrop's has ramped up its grilled chicken production at the facility, investing \$1 million and implementing new technologies like a laser tool for precision cutting. And utilizing modified atmosphere packaging to extend shelf life and automated labeling systems. Ukrop's has updated the container, the label and how the grilled chicken is packaged as part of its expanded chicken program.

Last year, Ukrop's purchased a water-jet laser, which perfectly slices the chicken into two 4.8-ounce pieces, drastically increasing Ukrop's chicken production. "It's important to get the chicken the right width and size before it goes into the grill," Stephen Melton, director of manufacturing, said. The trim is used in the chicken salad and other products.

"I love this grill," Melton said, pointing to a giant grill that the team purchased in California. Raw, portioned chicken pieces were fed into one side of the grill and came out the other side perfectly grilled with scorch marks. "We make the kind of chicken you could have grilled in your backyard."

Each retailer sets their own price, but a 6.7-ounce package of Ukrop's grilled chicken typically ranges from \$7.99-\$9.99, according to Melton.



A Ukrop's employee separates breasts from trim after it is cut by pressurized jets of water at the Ukrop's Kitchen in Chesterfield.



Chicken comes out of the grilling machine at the Ukrop's Kitchen. Ukrop's produces roughly 10,000 packages of grilled chicken per week.

The chicken at Ukrop's is locally sourced from the Shenandoah Valley. In one week, the chicken facility goes through 40,000 pounds of chicken breast. Ukrop's produces 10,000 packages of grilled chicken per week.

Over the past year, that's a three-to-fourfold increase in productivity, according to Ukrop. "It takes a lot of teamwork to do this," Ukrop said. "Hard work from all the folks here, we can't take what they do for granted." Many teammates at Ukrop's have worked for the brand for 20 to 30 years, showing the brand's reputation for longevity and trust.



Chicken flips and grills at a Ukrop's Homestyle Foods facility on September 2, 2025, in Chesterfield, Va.

New flavors planned

In the new year, Ukrop's will offer the blackened grilled chicken strips in all stores. They're also working on developing new flavors of grilled chicken.

Executive chef Thomas Pearce is working on developing legacy recipes, going back through Ukrop's recipe archives.

"There's a whole world of flavors out there that we haven't tried yet," Kantner said. The team at Ukrop's also talked about how they could apply their chicken approach to other proteins. "This is a new arena for us," Ukrop said of the grilled chicken expansion. "We're listening to our customers and what they want. We're making investments in facilities and equipment. "This opens the door for other things. It's a big opportunity. When opportunity comes your way, you don't want to miss it," he added.