

Rediscovering Traditional Meats from Historic Chicken Breeds

By Gina Bisco

The chicken meat most of us take for granted today is quite different from what our grandparents experienced. Today commercial chicken meat production is very different from methods and ideas common before the mid-20th century. Those of us who want to conserve old chicken breeds need to understand the traditional chicken meat classes and their excellent cooking qualities.

There are 4 traditional chicken meat classes: broiler, fryer, roaster and fowl. The traditional broiler age range was from 7 to 12 weeks, and carcass weight from 1 to 2 1/2 lbs. (Squab broilers would be youngest and smallest of these, typically Leghorn cockerels about 3/4 to 1 pound dressed.) The next age and weight group was called the fryer. Traditional fryer age range was from 14 to 20 weeks, and carcass weight from 2 1/2 to 4 lbs. Traditional roaster age range was from 5 to 12 months, and carcass weight from 4 to 8 pounds. Most roasters were butchered between 6 and 9 months. Hens and roosters 12 months and older were called “fowl” or “stewing fowl” signifying that slow moist cooking methods were required.

These traditional meat classifications, used until the 1940s, were based on the growth patterns and carcass qualities of the pure breeds that were commonly used throughout the U.S. to produce eggs and meat. Traditional chicken meats were classified by butchering age because of the special product qualities associated with each age range. Even though modern product labels and modern cookbooks still use the terms broiler, fryer and roaster, these traditional meat classes no longer apply to the modern “meat line” chickens because of their extremely fast growth rate. The modern “meat line” chickens grow so fast that all sizes, even the largest size, are butchered before they are old enough to be classified as traditional fryers.

Historic breeds' natural growth rate may appear to be a disadvantage when compared with modern meat lines. But natural growth rate offers a very real and significant advantage that can only be obtained with age – *flavor!*

Though historic breeds can all be butchered young, in the past people preferred the richer flavor of the meat from chickens older than 12 weeks. Once it is realized that flavor cannot be hurried with faster growth, but requires time and age to develop, then the advantage of keeping historic poultry breeds becomes clear. The modern meat lines grow too fast to develop the rich flavor that people used to expect from chicken meat.

The modern meat lines are bred for uniformity, and to reach certain sizes under controlled conditions. They grow so fast that they have to be butchered quickly when they reach target weights. After about 9 weeks of age, modern meat lines suffer increased losses from bone and heart failure. They are not designed to live long enough to achieve the rich flavor that traditional chicken breeds achieve.

Historic poultry breeds are, in contrast, very flexible as to butchering age. *Any* historic pure breed can be butchered between 7 to 12 weeks for use as broilers, 12 to 20 weeks for use as fryers, 5 to 12 months for roasters, and over 12 months for stewing fowl. Although historic pure breeds were categorized as “egg breeds”, “meat breeds”, and “general purpose” or “dual purpose” breeds, these categories were not nearly so specialized as the modern mind tends to assume. Prior to development of the ultra-specialized single-purpose meat lines and egg lines, all pure breeds were managed more as multi-purpose flocks rather than exclusively for production of a single specific commercial product.

Prior to 1920 the egg breeds were so classified because of feed efficiency, smaller size, and lack of broodiness – not only in regard to number of eggs produced. The meat breeds were classified as such not because they were used only for meat, but because they were the best suited to producing the highest quality, largest and top-priced roasters. In fact, until 1920 and measured by eggs per hen per year, meat breeds such as Brahmas and Cornish were competitive with many egg breeds. Their primary disadvantages as egg layers were their greater food consumption and inclination toward broodiness. The general purpose breeds were therefore not the only category expected to produce both meat and eggs. Rather, general purpose breeds were considered most practical for general farms. General farm chickens were expected to be as productive as the egg breeds and meat breeds, but require less attention.

All historic breeds were once used to produce table eggs and meat. They were expected to lay well enough to be used for egg production, and every flock produced fowl when the layers were culled. All historic breeds produced about half cockerels and lacking the capability to accurately sex at hatch, excess cockerels were raised with pullets until they were old enough that the differences were obvious. The farmer could then decide which traditional meat classes would most profitably fit the excess males.

Probably most broilers and fryers on retail markets in the early 20th century were from egg breeds, such as the very popular Brown or White Leghorns. The egg breed cockerels did not have the carcass traits required to achieve the best roaster prices, so most were usually butchered at the younger broiler or fryer age. The heavy breed cockerels (cockerels from the meat, general, or dual purpose breeds) could be used for fryers or broilers if market conditions indicated it was too risky to keep them longer. But these breeds had the right body traits to be graded as excellent roasters when well grown. And roasters were always preferred.

The product qualities of a traditional high quality roaster do not at all resemble the modern meat line chickens in the supermarket labeled “roaster”. The carcass of a traditional roaster is overall longer and narrower, has a naturally shaped breast, and has proportionately far longer legs and larger thighs than the industrial meat line carcass of the same weight. The carcass of meat line “roasters” has a very broad breast and relatively tiny legs and thighs. The traditional roaster carcass yields a fairly even amount of dark meat and light meat, whereas the meat line roaster yields nearly all light meat and little dark meat. And, due to the much younger butchering age, the meat line roaster has a soft texture and bland flavor, while the traditional roaster has the rich flavor and firm texture expected of the more mature chicken.

The traditional meat types each require appropriate cooking methods. Far from being a disadvantage, this greatly expands culinary potential. But, after more than 50 years of supermarket chicken, most Americans don't know the first thing about cooking older chickens, and have no contemporary sources to turn to for that information. Modern cookbooks are designed for the modern meat line product.

Generally speaking, the quality and flavor of chicken meat from historic breeds is going to be superb as long as it is understood that different ages require, or are best suited, to different cooking methods. The key is to know the butchering age of the bird as well as when the bird was butchered.

Top meat quality requires proper processing. At butchering time, chickens must be killed quickly and humanely, stressed as little as possible. Stress reduces meat quality. Also, it may be that hand plucking could result in better meat quality for older butchering age ranges, as the mechanical pluckers are said to toughen meat somewhat.

After processing, for best meat texture, chickens should be chilled and aged before cooking. Most sources recommend chilling and aging chickens for 24 hours, and up to 3 days before freezing. I think aging at least 24 hours improves the texture, and that older chickens are better with longer aging, up to perhaps 5 days in the refrigerator for fowl. The properly aged bird should retain a very fresh clean smell with no hint of taint. I've read that chickens that are to be frozen need not be aged first if they will remain at least a month in the freezer. However, that advice may have been based on industrial meat lines, butchered very young. For historic breed chickens butchered at 12 weeks or older, freezer aging may not be enough. If a chicken was not aged in the fridge for at least 24 hours before freezing, then after thawing I usually will allow it another day or more to age in the fridge, before cooking.

An important generality about the difference between cooking modern meat line chickens and cooking historic breed chickens is that for the latter there is a bigger distinction in time needed to cook the light and dark meat. Modern meat line chickens, being all butchered within a very young age range, all have leg meat nearly as tender as the breast meat, which will cook about as fast. The historic breed chicken has had more exercise over a longer time before it is butchered, which greatly increases flavor but also increases cooking time for those muscles. This becomes noticeable in the fryer age range: the breast meat of a fryer will reach optimal doneness noticeably before the legs. The difference increases as the butchering age increases, and seems pronounced in birds over one year. The cook has to plan how to prevent the breast meat from getting overcooked, and dry, by the time the leg meat is done. Good cooks will find many ways to achieve this end, and the results are well worthwhile.

The traditional classifications indicate the ages best suited to different cooking methods. Broilers are the youngest and tenderest chickens and can be cooked by quick dry heat methods. At the broiler age range, up to 12 weeks old, historic breed cockerels are quite slim and usually under 2 pounds carcass weight. Due to the tenderness of youth as well as their slim proportions, they are suited to broiling, whole or split in half, by direct heat such as in the oven broiler or outdoor grill.

The traditional fryer age is up to about 20 weeks old with the bird usually not weighing more than 4 pounds. At this age cockerels have had a lot more exercise and have developed wonderful flavor, but should still be tender enough to cook by dry heat methods - though to cook evenly they usually have to be jointed. Egg breed cockerels are reputed to be excellent fryers, and at that age range may be as meaty relative to their smaller bone size as the cockerels of heavier breeds. Fried chicken is really worth the mess and calories, at least occasionally, with home raised fryers.

The roasting age range specified for historic pure breeds is from 5 months to about one year, but most traditional roasters will be butchered between 6 and 9 months. This age range is expected to have much richer flavor. General purpose breed roasters can be baked uncovered in the oven at moderate temperatures. But open pan baking requires frequent basting. I find it easiest to get consistently great results throughout the wide roaster age range by using an old graniteware "chicken roaster" that has a tight fitting lid. This type of dark enameled roasting pan was designed to retain moisture and brown the bird without taking the cover off. (Good browning may not happen in a roasting pan with cover made of shiny metal.) If the cockerel is over 10 months old, I'll usually put in a cup of water. Baked at about 325 degrees Fahrenheit (F) for about 30 minutes to the pound, without removing the cover, they do not need basting and the skin browns nicely. The breast should still be moist and not overcooked when the legs and thighs are tender; if that doesn't happen, try a lower temperature and more minutes to the pound. It also helps to cook the bird with the breast down.

General purpose breed cockerels are usually from 4 to 6 lbs carcass weight at roaster age. Historic meat breed cockerels should surpass the weight of general purpose breed cockerels at some point in the roaster age range, and their flavor should be equally wonderful. While I believe egg breed cockerels should make fine small roasters, they may require moist heat cooking at an earlier age range since they reach maturity significantly younger than the heavier breeds.

Hens and roosters butchered at older than one year, classified as "fowl", make very fine eating also. This class was perhaps the most commonly eaten and least seasonal type until the mid-20th century. But today mature fowl is rarely available, unless you keep your own flock or know a farmer who does. It is essential to use moisture and low temperatures in cooking hens and roosters over 1 year old.

It will take hours longer to cook fowl, but the meat is richly flavored and was esteemed for sandwiches, chicken salad, pot pie and all recipes calling for cooked chicken meat. Fowl will become just as tender as younger chickens as long as it is kept moist and the meat temperature is kept low, preferably below 180 F. If the meat temperature goes above 180 F, the protein fibers toughen so that even if it is cooked long enough to fall apart, the individual fibers remain tough. When stewing, the water should not be allowed to boil, but should be kept at a simmer temperature, 180 F or less. Fowl can also be steam-baked with 1 or 2 cups water added to the pan; the pan should be tightly covered so the moisture won't escape, with the oven temperature at 300-325 F.

Whether stewed or steam-baked, the breast meat of fowl will be best (especially good for sandwiches) if it is removed as soon as it is done, which may be a couple of hours before the dark meat is done. I allow at least 3 hours to cook a 3 1/2 to 4 lb hen.

Some prefer the electric slow cooker for stewing chickens. The only slow cooker I've tried allowed the meat temperature to get too high, 200 F or higher. Perhaps others have better slow cookers.

A great advantage of the historic chicken breeds over modern meat lines is discovered when making broth. It is hard to make good broth out of supermarket chicken. They are so young that there is just not much flavor in them to make a good strong broth (and in the process the meat becomes tasteless mush). Our ancestors knew and greatly appreciated the rich flavor of strong chicken broth. Historic chicken breeds can all be expected to produce superb broth.

There are basically two methods for making chicken broth. One is to stew the chicken. With this method,

flavor goes out of the meat and into the water, so to protect meat flavor, use only 3/4 to 1 cup water per pound. Fowl is the best choice for this method of making broth because fowl has the most flavor. A 4 lb. stewing hen can be gently simmered in enough water to produce between 1 and 1 1/2 quarts of rich broth, while retaining good flavor and texture in the meat. Do not allow the meat to boil.

Another method of making broth is to use the bones and skin from baked chicken (like Thanksgiving turkey soup). Simply add water and simmer on the stovetop for a couple of hours. This method makes decent broth from chickens that are much younger than 1 year (though older are still better). According to one cookbook, for a rich broth the proportion should be about 2 cups water for every cup of bone and meat scrap. I expect to get about 4 to 6 cups of rich brown broth from the bones and skin of a roaster or old hen that was first oven cooked. Bones and skin from baked chickens can be saved in the freezer until there is enough to do a large batch of broth at one time.

Usually cookbooks that give directions for cooking fowl specify “stewing hens” and don't say anything about roosters. Some modern books on raising chickens even say that old roosters are not good to eat. But, remember the old song, “She'll be comin' 'round the mountain”? It was the *old red rooster* that was going to be made into chicken and dumplings. From my own experience I'd guess that meal was worthy of song. The general purpose breed roosters I've butchered have been very good to eat, even when several years old. Properly stewed, the old rooster's meat has superb rich flavor and the texture is firm but tender, not dry, tough, or stringy. The rich broth from stewing an old rooster is truly wonderful. Use more than 1 cup water per pound when stewing a rooster; roosters yield significantly more strong rich broth than hens.

For more information and recipes well suited to all the traditional meats that can be produced from the historic breeds of chickens, look to old cookbooks from before the 1950s. Here are some favorites:

Fowl and Game Cookery, by James Beard, 1944.

Better Homes and Gardens Cook Book, 1941.

The Modern Family Cookbook, by Meta Given, 1942

Let's Cook It Right, by Adelle Davis, 1947, 1962, 1970.

Some cautions regarding old cookbooks are in order. Those from the mid-1800s and earlier can be very hard to follow. The older the cookbook, the sketchier the instructions seem to be, and the more likely they are to use unfamiliar terms. Cookbooks from the late 1800s and later are the easiest to decipher and tend to give more complete instructions.

Don't believe it when a cookbook tells you hairs on the chickens are a bad sign or that they mean the bird is old. The hairs are just filoplumes, a hair-like feather, whose presence and length is variable and not directly related to age. People commonly used to singe them off. They can also be plucked with tweezers, or left on if they don't bother you.

Another old cookbook caution is outdated ideas about food safety and bacteria. Some say you can stuff a chicken the day before you cook it, which is now considered a dangerous practice. Some old cookbooks also say chicken can be stored at temperatures well above what is now considered safe.

Aside from these sorts of cautions, what old cookbooks say about cooking chickens is generally true for historic breeds. After all, those were exactly the chickens that were familiar to cooks then. No one would have known what to do with a 6 or 7 pound, 9-week old supermarket chicken. The size would have made an impression, as would the bland flavor.

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