

BRESSE-GAULOISE

More than 400 years old, and still fresh and lively

Text: Dirk de Jong

The Queen of Poultry, the Poultry of Kings. This is how Brillat Savarin named this breed, the Bresse, in 1825. A breed of chickens, just like chickens were meant to be, they say. It's the only one from the old breeds that knew how to impose itself as a 'product', in a world full of genetic improvement and carefully planned crossings. This was largely due to the people who loved life, or, in other words, the ones who knew how to 'taste' it: wine, cheese and chicken, these will help you live long! And have the healthy kind of life you can only get in your homeland.

The philosophy

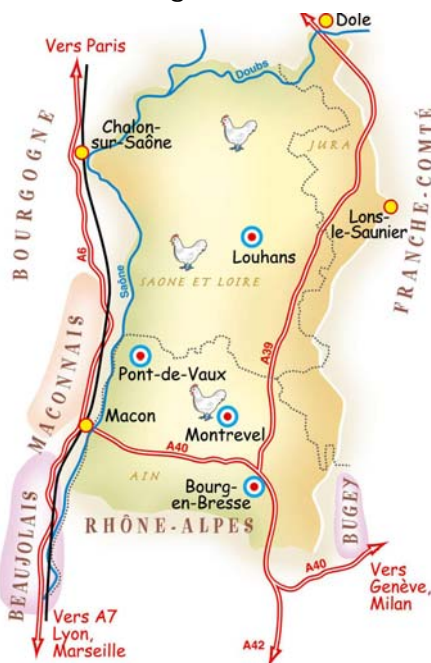
Quietness is good for people, animals and their nourishment. That is why food and drinks taste better in the region where they are produced. It's not all about that holiday-feeling alone! Bresse chickens

grow up free, in fields full of aromatic plants, and are given enough time to develop. They are fed only local, natural products, with grains from their homelands, drinking the same fresh water that irrigates the crops. No needless transport of living animals; the chickens are often slaughtered on the farm, which causes less stress to the bird and ultimately leads to an even better product. To protect this product, 'the Bresse chicken' has been branded and has a quality certificate, recognized officially thanks to the perseverance of a handful of dedicated breeders. The Bresse is the first chicken breed in the world which has managed to get such recognition. Today it sets an example for many regions.

The history

Chickens have been kept for hundreds of years due to their economic qualities. Local circumstances and cooking - traditions ultimately dictate what a breed of chickens looks like. From a historical point of view, the first mention of chicken breeding in the Bourg-en-Bresse region dates from November 12, 1591. The Baron of Treffort received a gift from his loyal subjects, consisting of 2 dozens fat cocks, as a sign of their gratitude. For hundreds of years, the Bresse held the highest position as a chicken breed in France; the only one that could compete with it was La Flèche. One should notice that we are talking about a time when the Asiatic breeds hadn't been brought to Europe yet! The advantage of these two breeds (La Bresse and La Flèche) was their white skin. In France, there wasn't any preference for chickens with yellow legs and skin, as far as cooking was concerned.

Judging by its appearance, the Bresse is a simple countryside chicken, as everybody knows it. Their





simplicity almost brought them to extinction; the only warranty when buying a Bresse was checking for these features: a red single comb, blue legs and white skin.

In those times, chicken – carcasses were being sold together with their heads and legs. Dishonest merchants used to sell any chicken with these characteristics as Bresse, as they would bring more money compared to other breeds.



Above and on the right: Bresse of Bourg, in Niort, France

Three main types evolved in the region where the Bresse was created, each of them with its own colour and having traits that distinguished them from the others. The difference resided in weight, form, ear-colour and egg production. The first, and consequently the oldest variety was the grey (silver pencilled) "The Bresse of Bourg", a good layer, with a heavy body structure, so a nice dual – purpose breed with a fairly rare colour because there weren't many grey varieties in France.

Then there was "the Bresse of Beny-Marlox", which only had a white variety and had been selected from the grey variety. This variety has the closest resemblance to the Bresse-broilers that are seen today. (See picture below, taken in Niort, France, by Dirk de Jong)



The black variety, "the Bresse of Louhans", was the lightest of the three, but in the same time was the best layer, and their eggs were the biggest. Much later, a fourth variety was created, the blue Bresse. This one is not recognized in the Netherlands.



Left: Bresse of Louhans.
Photo courtesy
www.raskippen.be

As far as their temperament is concerned, the Bresse were true farm chickens that preferred sleeping in trees overnight. According to their ancestry, the Bresse were active foragers, going far from their house in search for food. Next to their fame as meat-producers, they were also known for their big white eggs.

The history of the Bresse wasn't always so shiny. Around the year 1900, the breed was almost extinct because of the many crossings. Luckily, there were some people who remained true to the pure breed. In 1904 a new Standard was issued and a rehabilitation of the Bresse was begun. The "Bresse" brand name has been legally protected since the 22nd of December, 1936, and only the birds that measure up to the standard can be called "Bresse". If the birds don't, or they come from another region, their name suddenly becomes Gauloise! (Not to be mistaken for the Gauloise Dorée (=gold salmon); another ancient and very rare French poultry breed.)

Strict Rules

One has to strictly follow a great number of instructions and recommendations before being allowed to name his chickens "Bresse". Because a Bresse is not really a Bresse until the "Appellation Controlé" decides so. But don't worry, this makes the price of your products even better! One must have at least 5000 square metres in the district of Bourg-en-Bresse; 10 metres for each bird and a certificate from the School of Agriculture and Gardening in Bresse. Then, the chicks have to be approved by a special Bresse organization, "*Centre de Sélection de la Volaille de Bresse*", and their feed has to be bought from specifically recommended producers and distribution channels. Last but not least, one has to allow the controllers from AC to verify them and always stick to the rules of adequate breeding.

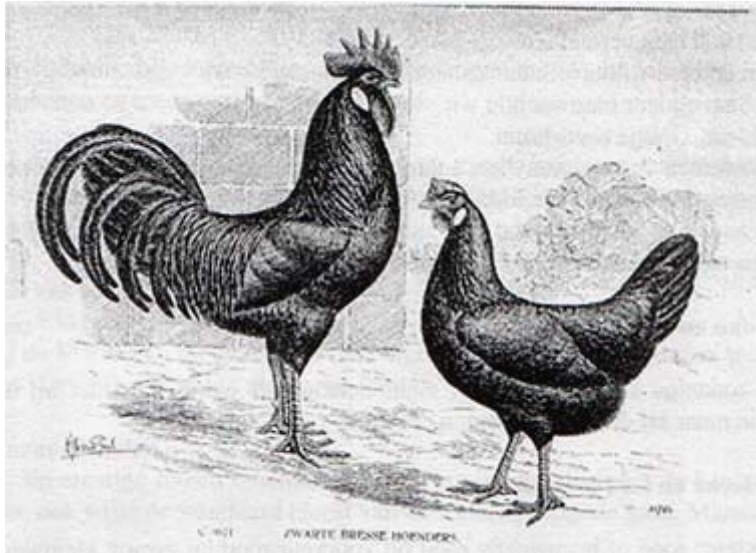


Appearance

All varieties have a single, fairly big comb, hanging on one side at the hen, dark eyes and – above all - blue legs. In France, this is also the nickname of the breed: "*des pattes bleues*". According to the French standard, the type of the

Bresse is identical in all varieties: a little more than average in size, rather long body, elegant and lively, with an especially fine carcass, but with the kind of body structure that preserves the characteristics of both an egg-layer and a meat-type chicken. Ears are white; a little bluish at the hens from the grey and white varieties and with a little red at the cocks in these two varieties. The eyes are dark. The colour pattern of the grey is also described. Cocks weigh 2,5 to 3 kilos, hens between 2 and 2,5. Ring size: male 18mm, female 16 mm. But now these original Bresse/ Gauloise chickens are hard to find. The Bresse-broiler of today is significantly heavier in structure and has few similarities, in fact, with the original white Bresse.

The breed is also described in the old Dutch poultry standard from 1946:



“Characteristics – The Bresse is unrivalled as a producer of fine meat. The meat is white and extraordinarily tender and delicate. Although they don’t get very big, they produce an especially nice and tender roast. Remarkably, besides their qualities as meat – type birds, they are excellent layers. The eggs of the Black variety are particularly big, weighing 70 grams or more. Even the grey hens, which are in the

second position to the whites as far as the size of their eggs is concerned, lay eggs weighing around 54 grams. The eggshell has a white colour; the bone structure is very fine. Some of the hens are not so reliable as broodies, but they are fairly good mothers on average. A certain percent of the females never go broody. The birds grow up pretty fast, and the hens begin laying early. The chicks are hardy and their plumage develops quickly”.

Upper left: Drawing by van Gink, 1924. From the archives of the Special Club for French Poultry Breeds

Below: Bresse from The Netherlands, 2006. Photo Aviculture Europe

After a period in which the breed had disappeared from the standard, it had a fresh start. The description of the Bresse in today’s Dutch Standard is somehow different from the French version. Where the French one describes a chicken with a rather long body, the Dutch Standard mentions a bird with a more compact structure. The standard weight of the birds is 250



grams lighter in The Netherlands, and their legs are noticeably thinner: Ringsize cock 16 mm, hen 15 mm. The description of the grey variety differs from the 'usual' grey, as well as from the French description of it. But the breed is so rarely seen at shows, that as far as colour varieties are concerned, almost everything goes. In addition, according to the Dutch Standard, the birds should have brown-red eyes, while the French one asks for the eyes to be as dark as possible – in the latter case, red eyes are therefore a serious fault. At this point, a mention should be made: the Bresse-broilers have red eyes.

In Belgium, the breed is admitted to the standard in the grey, black, white and blue varieties; they have the same weight as the one stipulated in the French standard and the ring size of 16 mm for the male and 15 mm for the female.

In Germany, the breed is not in the standard, even though there are some breeders.

In England, the Bresse was imported in 1895 and it was still present at shows in the 30's. At present it is not included in the English standard.

**Right: Dutch Bresse cock, 2006.
Breeder: Piet van der Sar.**

**Left, below: White Bresse Chickens in
The Netherlands at Wim de Haan's.**

Georges Blanc, the legendary director of the Inter-Professional Committee for Bresse Chickens, applies the rules very strictly and does not allow the breeding of chickens under the name "Bresse" elsewhere. Not even in the USA or Canada, where the "Blue Feet" or "Poulet Bleu" has been created, as their own



version of the French myth, Poulet de Bresse. And that, because a market already exists for this breed (read *type of meat*).

Other countries have their own imitations, as well – in The Netherlands, too, where it is called "Poulet den Dungen".

This is curious in a way. We are not talking about a breed anymore, but about a product, created through special methods

of breeding and fattening.

Right: The label Poule den Dungen, a Brabant variety of Poule de Bresse, created by a historian, a notary and two clerks from Den Dungen.





Left: The Bresse breeder Raymond Aldolphy, France, with one of his Bresse capons. Photo: Ad Taks

So what makes the Bresse so remarkable?

It cannot be only the characteristics of the breed that make the Bresse extraordinary. In the district Bourg-en-Bresse, from the original 3 colour varieties, only a heavy, white chicken has remained, that can be kept behind a fence that is just 1 metre high. However, it is not an ordinary broiler. Their development has some special features; they grow up fast, but remain normal-looking chickens, without becoming so massive that they cannot stand up straight after the age of 3 months, like in the case of ordinary broilers. Next to their rapid growth, they mature early and are good layers. In the Club for French Poultry-breeds in The Netherlands one hears, every now and then, that 'genuine' white Bresse chickens are still

present in The Netherlands. A family from Zevenhoven got some eggs from a Bresse breeder, during their 1995 vacation. Some of the offspring of these birds went, among others, to Judge Tesselaar, who continued breeding them, as he was astonished by their vitality and egg production. In 1999, Mr. Jac. Kuipers and his daughter, a qualified poultry expert, got 20 eggs from a production poultry farm in Saint Etienne du Bois. The chicks hatched after the 'longest day' (21st of July), which would have normally lead to a future generation of smaller birds and poor layers. Still they started laying at the age of just 4 months; a surprising feature for a meat-type chicken! The extra cockerels had a nice taste, but nothing spectacular. Is it the air, or the water, then, that gives the special taste? We'll unravel a couple of secrets of cooking Bresse chickens.

Right: The Fattening (France) Photo: Ad Taks

The secret is in feeding, not only in the breed itself, even though care and rearing make the Bresse so special. The birds enjoy a period of free ranging in green fields, often grazed by sheep and cows. Afterwards, a period in the coop, where they are fed grains and milk. The time in which they are allowed to develop determines the category in which the chickens are included. First of all we have the Poulet, they are fattened for 2 weeks and slaughtered at the minimum age of 4 months, with the carcass weighing at least 1,2 kilos. Then comes the Poularde, fattened for 4 weeks, at a minimum age of 5 months when slaughtered, with the carcass weighing minimum 1,8 kilos. At last, the most impressive of all, the



capon; fattened for 4 weeks, at least 8 months old when slaughtered, with the minimum weight of 3 kilos.



There are distinctive brand marks indicating the consumers that they are buying a genuine Bresse. First the special ring, placed by the breeder on the left foot of the bird; this way one can analyse its origin. Then, the label from AOC, with the three - coloured seal. The Poularde and the Capon also have a second seal. The Bresse chickens are always sold together with their heads and feet.



I don't know whether people still do this, but they used to hang the carcasses in linen sacks, that had been previously soaked in milk. This method of wrapping up the chickens after slaughter was also used for a practical reason: they didn't have refrigerators at that time, so that way the meat could be kept for a longer period. After plucking the feathers, only the intestines were removed, just like a hunter does with his prey. Then the carcasses were tightly wrapped in tissue, just like mummies, so that almost no air could get to it. Using this method, the carcasses could be stored for as much as 6 weeks in cold places. I don't know whether these tissues were also soaked in milk, nor do I know for how long the carcasses should have been kept wrapped. They did this, so that the ferments from the milk could enter the chicken's fat; when it was roasted, the fat layer would melt and make the meat very tender. This trick of marinating in milk was also used in several other manners, I guess. Now, if I think about it, one could use different kinds of milk, to give the meat different tastes. I can imagine, for example, that goat-milk or sheep-milk would give another taste than mare-milk. If I gave you a good suggestion, you can always invite me to try it!

Right: Bresse cock, grey (silver pencilled). Photo (and breeder): Mandy Goossens

The Bresse today

At present (2006) there are 2 types of Bresse in The Netherlands, bred by fanciers and poultry keepers. Some breed the utility strain of the French Bresse and others prefer the Bresse – Gauloise; usually hobbyists, who keep them for poultry shows. Perhaps these two strains are related: a breed is always changing.

The white Bresse that we see at shows in The



Netherlands often have a type more similar to the utility strain. We must keep in mind that the Bresse, which lately has been bred in France for meat, has little to do with the old breed that was so famous.

The grey Bresse is only rarely seen, but it has some dedicated breeders and it can be found in show-quality. In the pictures you'll see among others Mandy Goossens' birds, typical for the Bresse-Gauloise.

Even though the black variety is recognized in Holland, we don't see these birds at shows and



don't know whether there are any breeders, either. Maybe one should look for it in Belgium or France.

Right and left, above: grey (silver pencilled) Bresse. There is an entire range of variations in the colour pattern of the hens. The hen that is looking at you has the best colour. Photo: Mandy Goossens.

Below: Chicks from the grey variety. Photo: Mandy Goossens.



Temperament/Behaviour

The white Bresse chickens are calm, and the grey are not at all shy, either, even though much depends upon the way they are treated. A breeder told us about the breeding of the grey variety: "I wanted a chicken with no leg-feathers, not totally white, that has a decent egg production and when needed, can make a nice filet in the frying pan. Thanks to some relatives I got to this breed, they had White Bresse and had already found people who were breeding the grey variety.



Then I started with 3 hens and a rooster. All were unrelated.

Left: Grey Bresse chicks. Photo: Mandy Goossens.

At present I have 4 hens and 2 cocks as breeders; a small flock and a pair. Fertility and results are very good, and the chicks grow up without difficulty.

You have no problem in getting chicks from this breed, only when you select for colour and standard things get a little more difficult... At the first show where I entered my birds, I only heard the mention, that they were Brakels, or Brakel-crosses. This is what you get when you raise unknown breeds! On the whole, they are now getting good points. Not yet excellent, but there is still time for that".

Conclusion

We all know it: earning a good reputation is not so difficult, but keeping it is the *real* challenge... This is a very special breed, which has been preserving its fame as a meat – type chicken for 400 years and still has it. Is this the reason for which its image stands on almost every church tower, like a monument of proven merits, then and now?

Right: a pair of grey Bresse in the snow. Photo Mandy Goossens.

