

# THE HISTORY OF THE ARAUCANA - PAST AND PRESENT



**By: Aviculture Europe**  
**Photos: With our thanks to Anne Cushing.**  
**These are USA chickens, thus not from Chile.**

No breed special is complete with the history of the breed. But what could we possibly tell you about the history of this breed? Even now, scientists are still searching for the missing links. As far as we know now, we can state that thanks to linguistic and etymological data we know chickens were already present in South America before the arrival of Columbus and probably came from Asia via the Pacific Ocean.

In 1519 the Portuguese explorer Magellan described poultry that resembled Araucanas on the west coast of South America. In 1526 a Spanish general and naturalist, Cabot, described poultry in Spain that laid blue eggs. In the 1700s they appeared in the UK and other European countries. Even Dutch pirates who particularly attacked Spanish boats mentioned 'funny chickens with earrings, which laid blue and green eggs'.

But despite these clear notifications, the scientific community was apparently not aware of the existence of these chickens until 1921, when Dr. Salvador Castello - a Spanish poultry expert - officially introduced the Gallina Araucana (*Gallus inauris*) or Araucana chicken at the World Poultry Congress in 1921 in The Hague, the Netherlands. He presented them as a new breed having 3 characteristics: blue eggs, rumplessness and ear tufts.





Later, however, Castello had to admit that the owner of these chickens, Dr. Ruben Bustos, had created these birds by crossing two types of Chilean chickens, namely the ones with ear tufts and normal tails, and the ones without tails and without ear tufts.

Dr. Ruben Bustos is known to be the patriarch of Chilean Poultry keeping. During the War of the Pacific (1879 to 1883) he visited in Araucanía (a region

between Northern Chile and Southern Peru) a *casique* (chief) with the name Quinenao. He noticed the many chickens without tail, and the chief explained that they liked the chickens to be without tail, because the foxes could not easily get hold of them. Also Felix San Martin, a distinguished Chilean landowner of the early twentieth century, in one of his writings says that 95% of the hens in the Araucanía had no tail. On another occasion, Dr. Bustos saw for the first time - as he claimed in his writings - chickens with ear tufts. In his description he noted that they were living in semi-wild conditions, sleeping in trees and the roosters, when crowing, ended their crow with a strange sound, like a laugh. The Mapuche named these birds 'Quetro'. This name is derived from the Mapuche word Kertes, which means stammering or stuttering, which refers to the strange crowing of

the cock. By crossing the two varieties he had himself developed a strain of the so-called 'Collonca de Arêtes'.



The original types, in principle, were in separate geographical areas. Due to contact between Mapuche communities and between the Mapuche and the Spanish conquerors, the Colloncas and Quetros were gradually spreading. At the same time the original chickens mingled with European breeds, that were brought by the Spaniards, leading to the three main types of Chilean chickens found in Chile in the early twentieth century.

Professor Castelló established, in 1924, the following Chilean chickens:

- The common Chilean chicken, similar to ordinary European chickens and some lines laying blue eggs. The size, crest, and colour of plumage depend on the parents.



- o The second type is considerably smaller and rumpless, thus missing the tail and is more common than the other two types. The plumage colour varies greatly. They are called Collonca or Francolin. They all lay blue eggs.
- o Finally the chicken of 'normal' type, non-rumpless and tufted, commonly known as the Quetro. In these some lines lay blue eggs, a non-essential characteristic .

After the presentation by Dr. Castello the breed became very well known throughout the whole world. In 1925 a trio of the original type, presenting the three characteristics, was sent to America, but it wasn't until the late 1970's that the breed was standardized and recognized by the American Poultry Association (APA) as 'Modern Araucana'. They are rumpless and have tufts.

The "Poultry Club of Great Britain" also recognized the breed, and so did all European countries. In the UK the Araucana is bearded and they are also recognized as a crested variety and a variety with tail. Some Club websites:

<http://www.araucana.org.uk/> (UK)

<http://www.araucana.net/> (USA)

<http://www.vzv.de/Mitglieder/Araucana/index.htm> (Germany)

[http://www.crestedbreeds.com/crested\\_breeds\\_araucana.html](http://www.crestedbreeds.com/crested_breeds_araucana.html) (Australia)



Today, in Chile, the chicken that brings together the three features: ear tufts, rumpless and blue egg, can hardly be found, because they do not occur spontaneously but with difficulty and only through crossing the Colloncas and Quetros. They are still called by the Mapuche people 'Collonca de Arêtes'. This type is unstable and generally does not transmit its characteristics to offspring.



### A SURPRIZING DVD

It was a great surprise to be presented with an original DVD called '*En la Ruta del Huevo Azul*' (On the Blue Egg Route) by one of our readers, Henk Kooiman, who had brought it from the Terra Madre/Slow Food event in Italia 2008. As it turned out, *curadores* (farmers) of the blue eggs of the Gallinas Mapuche are supported by the Slow Food Presidium to preserve this product, outcome of Mapuche's traditions.

The DVD is promoted by Slow Food and the Chilean organization CETSUR ([www.cetsur.org](http://www.cetsur.org))

The spoken text is in Spanish – no subtitles - and was willingly translated for us by Mieke Breunesse.



On this DVD one of the speakers tells about blue chicken eggs already appearing in Chile over 1500 years ago. According to this speaker it is shown that there are obvious similarities between face images of the South Americans from the west coast (Chile and Ecuador) and very old stone sculptures from South-East Asia. In the West Coast of South America there was also discovered a Chinese ship wreck dated from 1431 and many times larger than the boat of Columbus (1492). There definitely had been traffic back and forth in the 13th century or even much earlier. According to this historian speaker it is therefore possible that the blue egg chickens came from SE Asia / China. Even more so because he says (if I understood properly?) that there are also Asian chicken breeds that lay blue eggs. (He is probably referring to the population of Dongxiang chickens in China, laying blue-shelled eggs.)

On the virtual tour we meet chicken farmers and breeders in various (sub-) regions of Chile. Most of them keep the chickens with blue eggs for sale and because it is said that the yolk is of better taste. One of the chicken breeders explains there are 4 or 5 varieties, among them are the Collonca and Quetro, which previously existed as separate breeds and subsequently crossed with European breeds and mixed. Chickens are shown with beard and ear tufts, with a naked neck, with various comb types and in many colours.



The beautiful images of landscapes and Chilean farmers - mostly women - make this DVD a pleasure to watch, despite the fact that the narration - in a Spanish dialect and without subtitles - is often difficult to understand, and sometimes completely unintelligible at all. The various facts about the blue egg were generally clear. One tells about the different types of blue egg layers, type of chicken houses, nutrition, laying

frequency and all the special details of these blue eggs, as the scale is 0.6 mm thicker than a brown egg, they stay fresh longer, the quality of yolk and protein is better etc). There are also discussions about green eggs, with the explanation that they call the blue eggs "from heaven" and the green ones "from the earth".





Pigmentation of the shell: The pigmentation varies from light-blue to half-dark olive green color, which is due to an enzyme secreted in the shell gland (distal part of the oviduct) transforming the hemoglobin in biliverdin, a pigment blending into the egg shell when the shell is growing up.

Photo © [www.cetsur.org](http://www.cetsur.org)

The Araucana chicken is mostly associated with the production of the blue eggs. This name Araucana is NOT used in Chile; the chickens are called *Gallina Mapuche*. Due to the development of the Mapuche and not-Mapuche farmers, it is hard or even impossible to find descendents of the pure or original Araucana chickens. (The name Mapuche is often mentioned on the DVD: Mapuche is the original name of the people; Araucana is the name that the Spanish conquerors gave to the Mapuche people and the region's chickens. The Mapuche still inhabit the Chile region where the blue egg chickens are kept.)



There is much heterogeneity between the chickens of a farm, being offspring of crossings of original *Gallina Mapuche* with chickens belonging to the Spanish conquerors. Today these varieties are valued for breeding qualities and blue egg laying capacities by the team of CET SUR local specialists. Still there are no guarantees for this and the selecting arguments are not the same in each farm.

A team of thirteen investigators researched the characteristics of the Blue Egg Layers in the Araucanía and Bio Bio region. They found several varieties that according to Mapuche and not-Mapuche farmers showed the best characteristics as good layers of blue eggs.

**Left: A Mapuche farmer's wife with one of her blue egg layers.**

**Photo: Rita Moya – CETSUR, Chile.**



The following varieties were mentioned by the local specialists:

- *Patoja*: Rather small and with short legs, mostly of a red colour, although other colours were noticed. They are found high in the mountains of the region of Bio Bio.
- *Trintre*: A frizzled variety. They exist in many colours, but are most often seen in the cuckoo variety, and mainly in the coastal regions of Bio Bio and Araucanía. Above all these are said to protect

against 'evil genii'; this is the reason why each household usually keeps at least one of these cuckoo frizzleds.

- *Cogote pelao* or *Huirrupel*: A naked-neck variety, which is known for the absence of feathers on the neck. They are not commonly associated with the old type of chicken, but they do lay blue eggs. Mainly found in the coastal regions of Bio Bio and Araucanía.
- *Copetonas*: These are crested and come in many colours. Mainly found high in the mountains of region Bio Bio.
- *Negra con collar* or *Jira*: Black or black with golden hackles. These are fairly large chickens that – according to the investigators - lay somewhat greenish tinted eggs.
- *Tejuela*: The colour of these chickens is mottled as in a mottled Wyandotte.
- *Perdicitita*: Partridge, named so because of the resemblance to the common partridge. And they are small chickens.
- *Negra*: Completely black, also the legs.

**Right: One of the Gallinas Mapuche, it has ear tufts, but that is the only resemblance with 'our' Araucana.  
Photo: Rita Moya – CETSUR, Chile.**

According to the reporter on the DVD, many of these varieties have kept the morphologic characteristics from long ago, before the arising of the industrial mass production of chicken meat and eggs that developed explosively in Chile beginning with the 1950's. The important characteristics that originally belonged to the *Gallina Mapuche* are the blue egg (or sometimes greenish), high resistance to illness and the capacity to digest low quality food and survive on limited food supplements. However, they must be kept outside in order to produce eggs. The Colloncas (rumpless) and the Quetros (with ear tufts) were only sparsely present at the farmers and local chicken keepers and when they were found, they were said to have come from not-farmers. Of all investigated chickens, only 50% were laying blue eggs.



## IN CONCLUSION

The more you try to unravel the history of the Araucana chickens, the more you start fearing the origin of this unique breed will be vanished forever in time. It has already been keeping the researchers busy for many years.

Clemente Onelli (1864-1924) stated in 1923: "Without any doubt the blue egg chickens originated in a region between South America pacific and the Andes, location 37° to 43°. Missioners and historians living from 1560 to the 17th century always stated that the Araucana Indians knew and tamed these chickens before the arrival of the European breeds."

Also Alessandro GHIGI (1875-1970) was very clear when starting around 1915 his publications about his experiments with Gallus hybrids. He was convinced



that there are obvious reasons to accept the existence of other breeds of feral chickens living in the Islands in the Pacific.

Due to new research methods new facts were published recently. A group of scientists reported this news, that hit the news in numerous magazines:

In 2007, an international team of scientists reported the results of an analysis of chicken bones found on the Arauco Peninsula in south central Chile, and their results were published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States. This initial report suggested a Polynesian pre-Columbian origin. See for full text <http://www.pnas.org/content/104/25/10335.full.pdf>

However, only one year later a later report looking at the same specimens concluded: "An apparently pre-Columbian, Chilean specimen and six pre-European Polynesian specimens also cluster with the same European/Indian subcontinental/Southeast Asian sequences, providing no support for a Polynesian introduction of chickens to South America. In contrast, sequences from two archaeological sites on Easter Island group with an uncommon haplogroup from Indonesia, Japan, and China and may represent a genetic signature of an early Polynesian dispersal. Modeling of the potential marine carbon contribution to the Chilean archaeological specimen casts further doubt on claims for pre-Columbian chickens, and definitive proof will require further analyses of ancient DNA sequences and radiocarbon and stable isotope data from archaeological excavations within both Chile and Polynesia".

See full report <http://www.pnas.org/content/105/30/10308>

And then we have the very interesting text by K. Blackwood on the Rapanui/Olmec Fowl.

The extensive version can be read at

<http://www.feathersite.com/Poultry/CGP/Rapa/BRKRapanui.html>

We found out that in China, there remains a population of Dongxiang chickens, also laying blue-shelled eggs, chickens similar to the Araucano in respect to specific shell colour. According to Yang it is demonstrated that the eggshell colour of Dongxiang blue-shelled chickens and Araucano resulted from the same genetic background, by association analysis of molecular markers closely related to the *O* locus (Yang et al., 2003).

This is the document <http://ps.fass.org/cgi/reprint/85/3/546.pdf>

But how about the statement that the Chinese discovered South America years before the first great European voyages of discovery, as is also mentioned by the voice on the DVD? Since a number of years there is much to do about this subject. In 2002, retired submarine commander and amateur historian Gavin Menzies (UK) wrote a book titled '1421: The Year China Discovered America'. On the internet there is a lot to find on this subject. We selected this website for you to read [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1421\\_Hypothesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1421_Hypothesis)

Of course it is a hypothesis, but you can draw your own conclusions.



Finally I would like to give you this as a last thought for further meditation: It seems there is no hesitation in accepting the Turkey and Muscovy duck as original South American species. Why should not the Araucana be a native species too?

The Araucana remains a bird of the mystery, a new Arabian Phoenix, which guards the secret of its origins going on with representing a challenge for the most serious and prepared breeders. A lot has already been written on the subject and probably much (digital) ink will be shed on it in the future.



**Above: Salvador Castelló Carreras, Director of the "Spanish Royal Poultry School" of Arenys de Mar, He presented the Araucana in 1921 to the First World's Poultry Congress in the Hague, Holland, and proposed the name "*Gallus Inauris*"**

**This is the last portrait of him taken before his death; he died on February 15th, 1950, being 86 years old.**

This Photo was taken from <http://www.summagallicana.it/Volume1/araucana.htm>; a website with the most extensive information on the Araucana breed. It is in Italian.

#### **TO END WITH**

Today the three mentioned varieties (Collonca, Quertro en Collonca de Arêtes) are very rare in Chile. According to the voice-over on the DVD, birds with the wanted qualifications have been re-introduced from poultry keepers from abroad.

As we all know that once some of the original Collonca de Arêtes between 1925 – 1930 were transported to the USA, we thought it wise to ask an USA Araucana breeder to do the special on this mysterious and challenging breed.

We hope you enjoyed the story by Anne Cushing.

**Right: Another pair of Anne's Araucanas.**

*For the sake of clearness we again draw your attention to the fact that these photos – unless otherwise stated – are all by Anne Cushing, thus not from Chilean chickens.*

