

THE LIMOUSIN CHICKENS

OR

THE FISHERMEN'S ROOSTER

Text and photos: Dirk de Jong (NL)

Edited by: Frank Povah

We have found another special French breed, the Poule de Limousines, also called Coq de pêche. At first glance an ordinary land fowl, compact and sturdy. No bells or whistles; a single comb, no beard or crest and no foot feathering. However, if we look closer at the rooster, the thin, long and abundant ornamental feathers immediately catch the eye. We are talking about a breed that has an extra utility trait, apart from the eggs and meat – namely, the roosters' feathers. This is a breed that is an exception to the saying: "the meat sells better than the feathers". You might wonder what this is all about? Well, we will explain in detail what a singular breed the Poule Limousines is; a breed whose feathers are very special, and provided only by the roosters. The hens serve to bring forth roosters, to lay eggs, and to give good meat. A real utility bird, as you would expect from a French breed and not double-duty but triple!

Right: When I first saw this rooster, I was sold.

In 2004, at the National Exhibition of France in Niort, I first saw the Limousin chickens and met Bruno Boulert. My interest was piqued.

In 2006, I again came into contact with this chicken. As the secretary of the French poultry club in the Netherlands I was approached by a Mister Van Rongen. He had bought chickens at a market in Limousin, France, and he didn't want them anymore. He also presented me with a booklet on the breed.



These chickens were a bit bigger and heavier than today's Limousin chickens, and sturdier, a farmer's fowl. The colour – in many shades of blue – was beautiful, and they may have been culled birds, as you'd assume that top animals are not offered for sale at a market. I passed these chickens on to a chicken lover and never heard or saw them again.



Left: The 'Ambassador' of the chicken breeds of the Limousin region, Bruno Boulert with his wife.

In 2013, I attended the Mairans Summer Festivities in Cieux, a village in the Limousin region. Present there was also the *Club des races gallines Limousines & Aviculture locaux* (Limousin Poultry Breeds and Aviculture Club) with some chickens and of course its ambassador, Bruno Boulert. Again I was very much attracted to these chickens. Such astonishing colours and feather quality!

Surely it would be possible to attract Dutch fanciers to this breed? As secretary of the Netherlands French poultry club, I am always seeking such opportunities. With help of my Belgian friend Ludo van de Neste, who is fluent in two languages, I purchased fertile eggs in 2014 and we got started.

Nature and behavior

The modern Limousin chicken is a very lively and robust breed. In behaviour they still resemble the Jungle Fowl. To give you an idea, I will describe the chickens I have.

Right: The first hatching eggs. They varied a lot in size, as you see.



Above: The chicks have hatched. Right: The chicks 4 days old. Look at the differences in down colour; I think that is very promising!



On July 10, 2014, I bought 27 fertile eggs from Bruno Boulert. The eggs had to travel 941 km in four stages to get into my incubator. Of those eggs one was cracked, but 19 chicks hatched and grew up very healthy and lively. What was striking was that the eggs hatched over a long period of time; the first one on day 21, the last on day 23.

The Limousin chicks are intelligent and enterprising, and love to escape from the broody box. However, they find their way back to the heat plate, feeder and waterer without apparent effort. At seven weeks they already have full plumage and roam over a large area.

Mine preferred to roost in a bush on a thin twig a half-metre above the ground, and didn't get a crooked sternum. Like some pheasants they are quickly independent and feathered and sleeping on a high roost at early age. If they grow up with plenty of room, the roosters are not extremely pugnacious, which is an advantage during rearing.

When on January 25 I moved them to the large meadow at the petting zoo – I'm the keeper there – I found that almost all the roosters weighed 3 kg, but didn't look heavy. Once on the large meadow they managed to escape several times by which we learned that they can fly very well. When a few of the group discovered the shelter made of branches, the peace returned and they were not seen for the rest of the day.



At 7 weeks old they behave a bit like Jungle Fowl.

Real Jungle Fowl, safely hidden in the bushes. The next morning they were all back in their old shed and this was repeated several times. Like homing pigeons - out all day and back to sleep safely in their coop or loft.

Limousin chickens are very alert and quick. Sensing the slightest danger they shelter. Still, I would not describe them as shy. This could well be an advantage in an area with many raptors.

On January 27 the first pullet laid, the other three females followed a week later. The Limousin eggs are not large but they do lay an egg, best described as a tinted cream colour, almost every day.

So much for today's Limousin chicken. But to see how this breed came into being, we need to go centuries back in time.

Origin

We can assume with confidence that the breed originated in Spain, as the first indications of a chicken breed with suitable feathers used in artificial flies is found there. There are two manuscripts mentioning chickens with such feathers, the first from 1624 by Juan de Bergara of Astorga and the second by Luis Peña of Leon. The towns are located in the Spanish regions of Castile and León, in the northwest of Spain. The chickens are known as Gallo Indio de León and Gallo Pardo de León and they come in different colours. In France, the first available report was in February 15, 1876, in an article on the "Coq de Pêche", in the bi-monthly French magazine *La Basse-cour* (The Farmyard). So it would seem that the Coq de Pêche dates from the late 19th century. In 1891, two residents from the Limousin, P. Verhac and H. Monjauze, described him in their work "News from the Limousin region".



Cieux, in the Limousin region. Beautiful lakes in the hills, all 258– 410 metres above sea level and a paradise for fishermen.

To understand the exchange of breeds between different countries and regions, some knowledge of history and geography will come in handy. France's Limousin region and Castile and León in Spain are on the route of the pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostle James in Santiago de Compostela. It is very likely that pilgrims took these chickens back with them to France.

In the regions under discussion, there are many wetlands, a paradise for anglers. In France's Limousin: Corrèze, Creuse and Haute-Vienne with the Creuse and Dordogne rivers and numerous ponds and lakes. Lake Vassivière is among the largest in France and surrounded by hills and mountains. In Spain's León: a network of main and secondary tributaries merge to form the Douro, Spain's largest river. Both regions attract many anglers, but they have more in common. Both in Spain and France we find the same type of granite soils.

In France, the breed was almost exterminated during the Second World War, but through the efforts of some avid fishermen it is back, and is now a protected breed. The Haute-Corrèze is named as the place of origin of the revived Limousin chicken, as it was bred here on a large scale by farmers and fishermen. Not all males would have the typical characteristics, so in the course of the years there may have been outcrosses with other breeds or wrong selections may have been made.



Long supple feathers, tails like flags in the wind.

Plucking the feathers in earlier years.

Nowadays, the roosters are slaughtered and the feathers sold as tufts still on the skin, or as a pelt or cape. Feathers on the skin retain their quality longer. Today, from a productive breed like the Limousin, one can quickly breed a large number of chickens. In earlier times it was not possible to stimulate laying by artificial lighting, and there were hardly any incubators, so it was necessary to preserve the roosters. They were not slaughtered, but feathers suitable for fly-tying were 'harvested' by plucking.

It went like this: The feathers were plucked only from adult males at set times in accordance with established customs. Gaidy Charles wrote about this topic in an issue of 'Connaissance de la pêche' (Literally Fishing Knowledge):

"In general, the feathers picked at 10 months, are used for the manufacture of nymphs. The feathers of cocks 18-months and older are picked for making dry flies. Two or three days after the new moon (this time promotes good regrowth of the feathers), after having determined that the feathers are ready, the rooster can be picked. To determine if the plumage is ready for picking is done as follows. One picks a hackle, if one encounters no resistance and the rooster makes only a soft cackling sound, that's good. Then one looks at the bottom of the shaft, which should show a small well shaped tip, opaque and no traces of blood. The feathers are pulled out one by one, with an occasional pause, and the well-being of the rooster is closely monitored throughout the operation. This can be seen in lively eyes, a not too hot comb and an acceptable degree of nervousness."

"Afterwards the cock really does look like a plucked chicken; he gets a light massage with a soothing, calming pomade or olive oil. This can be repeated every three months. This means that the feathers are harvested four times a year. The first harvest should occur at new moon in February, the next in May, August and then again in November." (See also his book: [Les Coqs de Pêche en Limousin](#). Literally, Fishing Cocks of Limousin)



Left: Feathers of the shoulder and back. These are very suitable to tie tails and wings of the fly.

Below: These are hackle feathers, you can see clearly that they lack the beards to make a closed feather vane; these look almost like hairs.



The Feathers

This breed owes its existence to feathers that are very suitable for making flies for fly-fishing. What qualities must such a feather have? It should be solid but flexible and with as little down as possible, with free and stiff barbs. The feathers should also have the desired colour and special lustre. Formerly only the feathers of the cock were used; the hackle and saddle feathers and some from the back. Today, female's feathers are used also,

after it was discovered that they also have special features.

Limousin feathers are very fine and smooth, many of the body feathers lacking the hooks (barbicels), rendering them silky. The roosters especially catch the eye with their long saddle feathers and the flexible tail that moves with every movement or breeze. These properties make them the most popular feathers, well suited to replicate fish flies. They are popular with fishermen, who, with artificial flies try to outwit trout, salmon and rudd.

On both French and Spanish websites a mention is made of the special type of soil in the Limousine and Leon regions where the chickens are bred, namely granite. This granite would have a natural radioactivity and, according to the inhabitants of the region, this radioactivity affects the adrenal glands of the roosters and causes an acceleration in the production of keratin, the substance that forms the feathers, is a source of the pigmentation, and adds to



the lustre. Personally, I think this is a smart sales pitch; just what you need when asking people to pay 20 euros for a tuft of feathers. For us, our Limousin chickens at the Children's Zoo also have long supple feathers with a wonderful, special metallic sheen. Could there perhaps be a natural radioactivity in the soil? I wonder...

Colours

Anglers who tie flies prefer to have the widest possible range of blue colours and Limousin chickens in the blue colour variety amply meet this need. The blue comes in many shades, often with a variety of colour splashes and if you breed the blue variety you also get black and splash birds. And often there is also some red in the black and you have a varied colour scheme. Due to the dilution factor (blue) you get different shades of red, up to ginger and yellowish shades. With Limousin chickens you will have everything you are looking for.

The colour blue is a combination of light and dark tones; the rooster's ornamental feathers are generally dark blue and the hens' are blue with a dark collar. But in the case of the blue Limousin rooster, the ornamental feathers are often mingled with yellow, honey, ginger or reddish shades. These colours do not even fit



in the AOC class and a judge at an exhibition will not know how to assess them. In the Netherlands, the Limousin chickens are shown in the 'Mirror of the Fancy' - a separate class of new creations and such, where the breeder gives some explanation on a card hanging on the pen.



Of course, the sheen of the feathers – which excels in the light – must also be assessed; that is at least as important as the colours. As for assessing the colours, one must have a good eye for the colour nuances of the ornamental feathers of the rooster, because they constitute not only the beauty but the utility of the breed also.



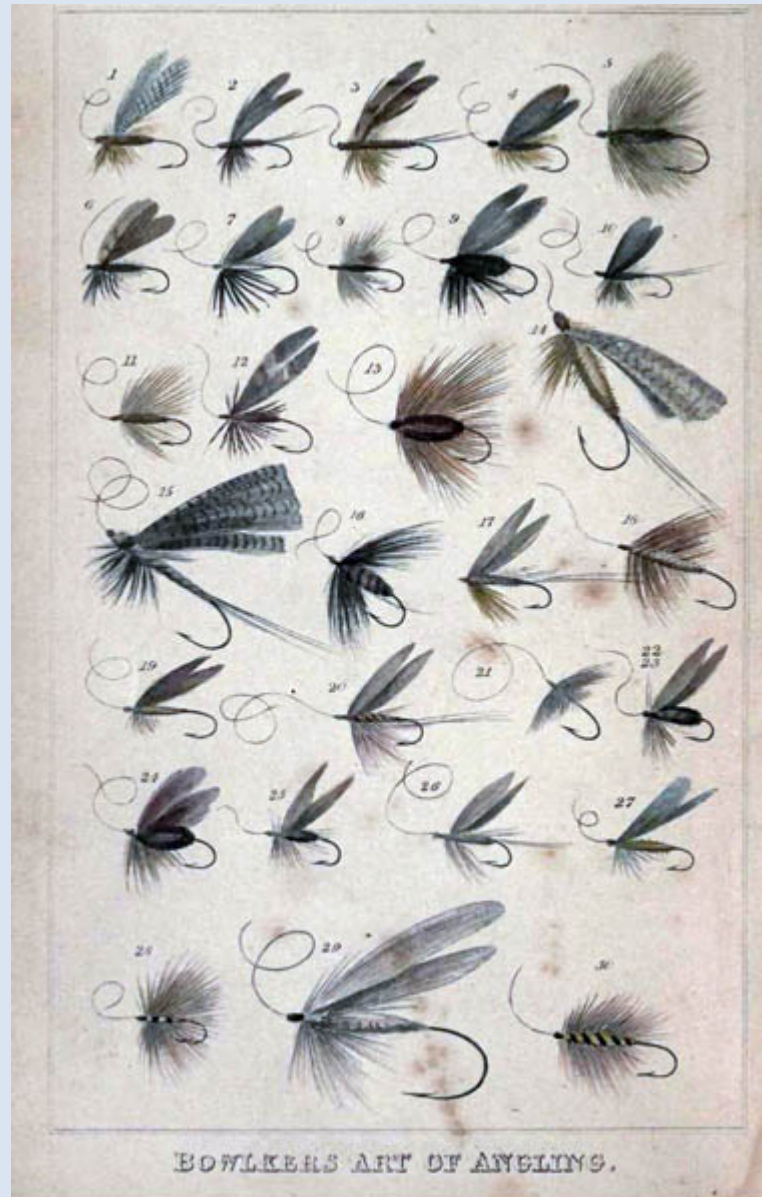
Fly fishing

There is still a hunting instinct in many men. Fishing is also a form of hunting, to capture food. To outwit a fish you must be very smart and inventive; that explains why the guy next to you pulls one fish after another out of the water and you catch nothing.

Fishing with artificial flies is a very old custom, going back to ancient Greece. The Greek teacher Claudius Aelianus wrote in his *De Natura Animalium* (On the Nature of Animals) how fishermen replaced natural bait with a hook equipped with a red woollen thread and two small yellow feathers from the hackle of a rooster. In 1660 Francois Fortin lectured in his book *Les Ruses Innocentes* (Simple Tricks) about flies made of feathers from hens, roosters and capons. This has now been elevated to an art, which in turn has led to a high demand for these special feathers.

Right: Illustration from Bowlkers, Art of Angling.

Fly fishing is an art. Like many of you no doubt, I, too, used to think that you simply fasten an artificial fly onto your line, as you would a worm or maggot, and you start fishing. Nothing is farther from the truth. A fly fisherman should be an aficionado of the insect kingdom. He or she must know which bug flies where and in what season, and that may change in even a few hours. One insect flies in the morning, the other in the evening. To give a simple example: a cockchafer doesn't fly in September. Then there are dry flies and wet flies; the difference being that wet flies do their



work underwater while dry flies float.

Left: A self-tied fly.

Besides feathers many other materials are used, hair for one. Deer hair for instance is hollow and so is combined with feathers commonly used for dry flies. A dedicated fly fisherman must possess a whole set of flies, making for a great demand for special feathers.

It must be an indescribable feeling to lure a big fish on to the hook with a homemade fly – a feeling you want to experience again and again, and so the demand for feathers grows greater all the time.



We try everything. Here's Co Tersteeg, the honorary chairman and founder of the French Poultry Club, fly fishing with a homemade fly of Limousin chicken feathers.



And successful; he caught a beautiful trout.



Left: The feathers are often sold on the skin. At far left are saddle feathers and the other photo shows hackle feathers on the skin; a similar piece is offered for sale on the Internet for \$20.

In conclusion

Limousin chickens are very sprightly and alert, and not an easy target for predators.

They are good layers, the eggs not large but of a very nice flavour. Good brooders, they grow quickly and make a good and tasty table bird.

The hackle and saddle feathers are solid but flexible, the shoulder and back feathers with as little down as possible with free and stiff barbs.

The Limousin has a specific gene that makes the hackle and saddle feathers continue to grow. These special feathers offer unprecedented opportunities, not only for the fly fishermen, but – I think – for fashion, especially ladies' headwear.

Let's we preserve the original type and special qualities of this poultry breed. I see a bright future for the Limousin chicken.



Standard description of the Limousine chicken

Origin: France, region Limousin, particularly in High Corrèze. An old farming breed of the granitic regions of the Limousin, at moderate altitude and under brisk climatic conditions. The old breed was selected by Bernard Janisson. Its standard was set and recorded on 16 November 1990.

Overall impression: Medium sized fowl, fine-boned, very hardy. A good layer and brooder. Especially sought after for the cock's plumage which lends itself to the manufacture of fishing lures.

Note: In 1997 the Limousin bantam was also standardised.



Male Characteristics:

Body: medium size, somewhat upright.

Neck: medium long, profusely covered with hackle feathers up to the back and shoulders.

Back: short and flat, sloping slightly to the tail.

Shoulders: broad, covered by the hackle feathers.

Wings: tightly carried and well tucked up.

Saddle: broad, with long hackle feathers.

Tail: carried at an angle of 45 degrees from the line of the back, moderately full with sweeping sickles.

Breast: broad and full.

Abdomen: moderate.

Head: medium size.

Face: red, smooth.

Comb: Single, moderately large, straight and erect, the rear following the line of the head without touching the neck.

Earlobes: red.

Wattles: red, medium long.

Eyes: orange-red.

Beak: dark horn colour, short and stout.

Thighs: clearly visible.

Legs: moderately long, shanks fine and round, light grey with rosy sides.

Nails: strong, white; darker in the black variety.

Toes: four, straight and well spread.

Plumage: tight, not much down.

Female Characteristics:

The general characteristics are similar to those of the male, allowing for the natural sexual differences. The back is less sloping. The tail is carried half open. The comb is allowed to lop.

Serious Defects: too coarse body; yellow legs; missing the specific feather quality; weight of the male less than 2 kg; weight of the female less than 1,5 kg.

Right: Promising cockerel; the honey coloured highlights in its ornamental feathers may even improve as the bird gets older.

Colour varieties:

The approved colour varieties are blue, black, and blue with a mix of soft colour tones. The roosters in the latter colour variety are the most sought after by anglers; a blue-grey colour with hackles and saddle mingled with soft tones, varying from reddish brown to golden with honey coloured highlights. Breast, wings and tail are uniformly grey.

The colour of the hens is a greyish-blue, not laced, with a darker hackle.

Weight: Male: 2,5 to 3 kg. Female: 1,9 to 2.1 kg

Minimum weight of hatching egg: 55 g.

Egg colour: slightly tinted pink or cream.

Ring size: Male: 18 mm. Female: 16 mm.



Copyright ©2017

All rights reserved by the Aviculture-Europe Foundation.

This is a publication by the online magazine www.aviculture-europe.nl

English edition ISSN: 2352-2445

You are not allowed to copy, distribute, send or publish these texts or photos without our prior permission in writing.