

## Heritage Chicken Definition



## Press Kit



## **PRESS RELEASE**

EMBARGOED: April 17, 2009

### **Contact:**

Marjorie Bender, Research & Technical Program Director  
The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy  
(919) 542-5704, [mbender@albc-usa.org](mailto:mbender@albc-usa.org)  
[www.albc-usa.org](http://www.albc-usa.org)

### **Heritage Chickens Defined**

*The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy secures  
the term Heritage Chicken for consumers and breeders*

In an effort to secure the term Heritage in the food and agricultural marketplaces, The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC), a non-profit organization ensuring the survival of rare breeds of livestock and poultry, has defined the term Heritage for chickens.

“Defining Heritage for chickens will help assure the term is not incorrectly used by uninformed breeders or co-opted by unscrupulous marketers trying to sell something as historic that is not,” says Marjorie Bender, Technical Program Director for the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy.

Chickens have been a part of the American diet since the arrival of the Spanish explorers and since that time, different breeds have been developed to provide meat, eggs and pleasure. After World War II, traditional or Heritage breeds of poultry began losing favor to modern crosses specifically bred to meet production goals. In this day and age, many Heritage breeds are losing popularity and many are nearing extinction, but with this definition ALBC hopes to raise awareness for endangered breeds, to support their long-term conservation, to support efforts to recover these breeds to historic levels of productivity and to re-introduce these culinary and cultural treasures into the marketplace.

Heritage Chickens, as defined by ALBC’s newly released definition, are Standard breeds of chickens as defined by the American Poultry Association that are naturally mating, long-lived, and slow growing. “It’s a multi-faceted definition,” says Bender. “It means that these chicken breeds are explicitly defined by the American Poultry Association, just like breeds of dogs are defined by the American Kennel Club.”

According to the definition, the Heritage breeds must reproduce without the assistance of artificial insemination. While artificial insemination is not currently used for commercial chicken reproduction, it is very possible for chickens to follow the same path as industrialized turkeys, which are now reproduced exclusively using artificial means.

Heritage hens should actively reproduce for 5-7 years and roosters for 3-5 years. This is unheard of in commercial production where hens and roosters are used for breeding for a single generation before being dispatched as less than efficient.

Heritage Chickens are also slow growing by modern commercial standards, taking 16-18 weeks for Heritage Chickens as compared to 6 weeks for an industrial breed to reach a dressed (packaged) weight of 3 pounds.

Frank Reese, the founder of Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch in Lindsborg, Kansas, has been at the center of the push to get Heritage breeds back in the marketplace. Reese, who is committed to conservation, was very pleased in the surge in interest surrounding Heritage Turkeys in 2005 when ALBC released its first Heritage definition for turkeys. He hopes the Heritage Chicken definition will result in the same success for Heritage Chicken breeds. “These are the perfect birds for outdoor production,” Reese says of his Barred Plymouth Rocks and New Hampshire chickens, both Heritage breeds. “They are supposed to range and fly and eat bugs.” That makes them the best choice for those wanting the Animal Welfare Approved seal for humane production. “The right breed for the right environment” is an important step in raising farm animals humanely, says Anne Malleau, Associate for Global Meat Coordinator, Whole Foods Market, and former Research Director for the Animal Compassion Foundation.

So why does The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, an organization interested in genetic diversity, care about defining Heritage? Heritage Chickens come from long lines of historically useful and productive birds. As late as the mid-1950s, chickens like the Barred Plymouth Rock, the Jersey Giant and the Buckeye were found in butcher shops and on dinner tables. “Most so-called Heritage Chickens, turkeys, and other farm animals, are in danger of extinction. If we can give these animals a job again, we are more likely to be able to save their valuable genes. These genes ensure their bodies are healthy and may include resistance to disease and parasites,” Bender says.

Diversity in poultry breeds is critical for the long-term survival of the species. “We put our domestic food system at risk if we put all our eggs in one basket (no pun intended),” says Bender. “If our food system only relies on a single industrialized breed and something happens to that breed, we need the diverse genetics of other breeds to fall back on.” Heritage breeds provide this diversity along with many other hardy characteristics.

Executive Director of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy Chuck Bassett adds, “By defining Heritage for chickens it protects the term so that it is not misused, and so it becomes a term that consumers can rely upon.”

Heritage Chicken and eggs sell for a premium price. Buckeye breeder Doug Brown of Cedar Grove, North Carolina, sells his eggs for \$3.50 a dozen and sells whole chickens for \$5.00 per pound to some of the best restaurants in the area. “They can not get enough of them,” says Brown of his eggs. “They insist they are the best eggs they have ever eaten.” Brown is still expanding his flock, so he does not have many whole chickens to sell. What he does have available is in high demand.

The flavor of Heritage Chicken is better, too. It varies from breed to breed “which is the reason the definition specifies that the breed must be named on the package,” says Bender. Some have darker meat with a deeply intense chicken flavor. “My Barred Rocks have brought tears to peoples eyes,” says Frank Reese. “I had a lady call me to thank me. She’d been cooking chicken dumplings for her husband for years, but nothing was as good as he remembered his mother’s being. When she used one of my chickens, her husband said it was just like his mother’s.”

Consumers have found that Heritage Chickens are succulent, flavorful and worth the higher cost. When consumers enjoy a highly memorable meal, they are also helping to save endangered breeds. Ironically, eating endangered breeds of livestock and poultry can ensure their survival.

To see the complete definition of Heritage Chicken and to learn more information about Heritage Chicken breeds, go to [www.heritagechicken.org](http://www.heritagechicken.org).

###

# The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy Defines: Heritage Chicken

## DEFINITION

Heritage Chicken must adhere to all the following:

1. **APA Standard Breed.** Heritage Chicken must be from parent and grandparent stock of breeds recognized by the American Poultry Association (APA) prior to the mid-20th century; whose genetic line can be traced back multiple generations; and with traits that meet the *APA Standard of Perfection* guidelines for the breed. Heritage Chicken must be produced and sired by an APA Standard breed. Heritage eggs must be laid by an APA Standard breed.
2. **Naturally mating.** Heritage Chicken must be reproduced and genetically maintained through natural mating. Chickens marketed as Heritage must be the result of naturally mating pairs of both grandparent and parent stock.
3. **Long, productive outdoor lifespan.** Heritage Chicken must have the genetic ability to live a long, vigorous life and thrive in the rigors of pasture-based, outdoor production systems. Breeding hens should be productive for 5-7 years and roosters for 3-5 years.
4. **Slow growth rate.** Heritage Chicken must have a moderate to slow rate of growth, reaching appropriate market weight for the breed in no less than 16 weeks. This gives the chicken time to develop strong skeletal structure and healthy organs prior to building muscle mass.

Chickens marketed as Heritage must include the variety and breed name on the label. Terms like "heirloom," "antique," "old-fashioned," and "old timey" imply Heritage and are understood to be synonymous with the definition provided here.

**Abbreviated Definition:** A Heritage Egg can only be produced by an American Poultry Association Standard breed. A Heritage Chicken is hatched from a heritage egg sired by an American Poultry Association *Standard* breed established prior to the mid-20th century, is slow growing, naturally mated with a long productive outdoor life.

The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy has over 30 years of experience, knowledge, and understanding of endangered breeds, genetic conservation, and breeder networks.

### Endorsed by the following individuals:

*Frank Reese, Reese Turkeys, Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch, Standard Bred Poultry Institute, and American Poultry Association;*

*Marjorie Bender, Research & Technical Program Director, American Livestock Breeds Conservancy;*

*D. Phillip Sponenberg, DVM, PhD., Technical Advisor, American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, and Professor, Veterinary Pathology and Genetics, Virginia Tech;*

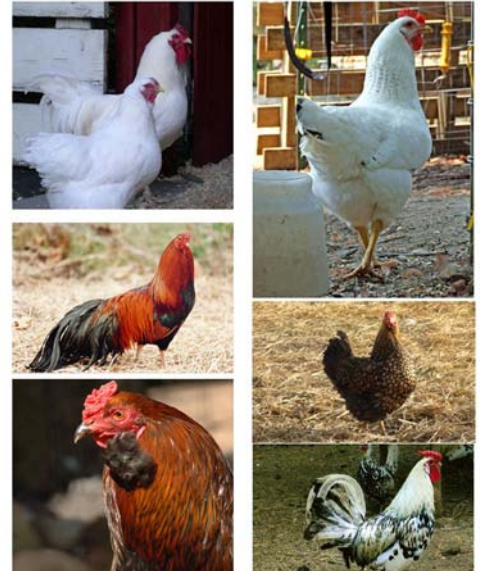
*Don Bixby, DVM, Independent Consultant, former Executive Director for the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy;*

*R. Scott Beyer, PhD, Associate Professor, Poultry Nutrition Management, Kansas State University;*

*Danny Williamson, Windmill Farm, Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch, and American Poultry Association;*

*Anne Fanatico, PhD, Research Associate, Center of Excellence for Poultry Science, University of Arkansas;*

*Kenneth E. Anderson, Professor, Poultry Extension Specialist, North Carolina State University.*



## Purpose

Chickens have been a part of the American diet since the arrival of the Spanish explorers. Since that time, different breeds have been developed to provide meat, eggs, and pleasure.

The American Poultry Association began defining breeds in 1873 and publishing the definitions in the *Standard of Perfection*. These Standard breeds were well adapted to outdoor production in various climatic regions. They were hearty, long-lived, and reproductively vital birds that provided an important source of protein to the growing population of the country until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. With the industrialization of chickens many breeds were sidelined in preference for a few rapidly growing hybrids. The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy now lists over three-dozen breeds of chickens in danger of extinction. Extinction of a breed would mean the irrevocable loss of the genetic resources and options it embodies.

Therefore, to draw attention to these endangered breeds, to support their long-term conservation, to support efforts to recover these breeds to historic levels of productivity, and to re-introduce these culinary and cultural treasures to the marketplace, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy is defining Heritage Chicken. Chickens must meet all of the following criteria to be marketed as Heritage.



## Definition

The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy

PO Box 477

Pittsboro, NC 27312

(919) 542-5704

[www.albc-usa.org](http://www.albc-usa.org)

The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy  
Heritage Chicken Definition

-Endorsers-



**Marjorie E. F. Bender**  
Research & Technical Program Director  
American Livestock Breeds Conservancy

Marjorie joined the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) staff in January 1999 and serves as Research and Technical Program Director. She has a M.Ed. in Agricultural Science from the University of California-Davis, has been involved in sustainable agriculture since 1991, and has over 20 years of experience in the non-profit sector. Marjorie's responsibilities include coordinating the poultry census, promoting rare breeds into appropriate habitats, and working closely with other staff on timely conservation activities. She has led ALBC's heritage turkey conservation effort. During her free time, Marjorie enjoys riding her Choctaw pony, a line of Colonial Spanish.

**Contact:** [mbender@albc-usa.org](mailto:mbender@albc-usa.org), (919) 542-5704



**Donald E. Bixby, DVM**  
Breed Conservation Consultant  
Former Executive Director of the American  
Livestock Breeds Conservancy

As ALBC's Executive Director from August 1988 through July 2002, Don was responsible for providing the vision and overseeing the implementation of the conservation activities of ALBC. Don has been involved with the organization since the 1980s, organizing the first North American rare breeds show and sale and establishing the ALBC Rare Breeds Gene Bank, which has expanded over the years. He has been the liaison to the USDA National Animal Germplasm Program and a leader in founding Rare Breeds International. He has overseen livestock and poultry research, and promoted rare breeds to the sustainable agriculture community. He was honored in 2000 by Slow Food International for the work of ALBC in conserving genetic diversity in the farm animal species.

**Contact:** [dbixby@albc-usa.org](mailto:dbixby@albc-usa.org), (540) 951-2386



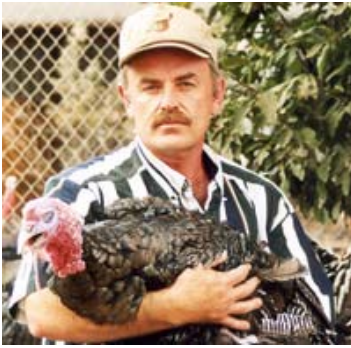
**D. Phillip Sponenberg, DVM, Ph.D.**  
Technical Advisor, American Livestock Breeds  
Conservancy and Professor, Veterinary  
Pathology and Genetics, Virginia Tech

Phil has served as the Technical Advisor for ALBC since 1978. He is employed as a veterinary pathologist and geneticist at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, VA. He has written several books on color genetics and rare breed conservation. He is sought after as a speaker on genetics as well as rare breed conservation. Phil has taken the lead on Spanish horse rescues and is a conservation breeder of Spanish horses and Tennessee Fainting goats. He works closely with several breed organizations as well as individual breeders of several different breeds.

**Contact:** [dpsponen@vt.edu](mailto:dpsponen@vt.edu), (540) 231-4805

## Heritage Chicken Definition

-Endorsers-



**Frank Reese**

**Reese Turkeys, Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch,  
Standard Bred Poultry Institute and American  
Poultry Association**

Frank owns and operates Good Shepherd Ranch in Lindsborg, Kansas. Frank has raised standard varieties of turkeys since his childhood, and he is currently leading the effort to conserve heritage turkeys through breeding, production collaborations with regional farms, and regional and national marketing strategies. He is dedicated to raising all of his poultry humanely on pasture and providing his customers with the highest quality turkey available. Frank also breeds chickens, ducks, and geese and has begun marketing selected breeds. In 2003 Frank received ALBC's Bixby-Sponenberg Breed Conservation Award for his contributions to the recovery of standard varieties of turkeys. Frank also works full time as a nurse anesthetist.

**Contact:** [Turkeys@ks-usa.net](mailto:Turkeys@ks-usa.net), (785) 227-3972



**Danny Williamson**

**Windmill Farm, Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch,  
and the American Poultry Association**

Danny breeds Standard Bred poultry for production and show. He currently maintains breeding flocks of 400 Black turkeys, 300 Plymouth Rock chickens, as well as Cornish, Dark Brahma chickens, and White call ducks. Danny is a general license judge for the American Poultry Association and has earned the title of Grand Master Breeder in Black turkeys, Standard Dark Brahma chickens, and White Call ducks. He serves on the Board of Directors and is employed as the General Manager and Chief Financial Officer of Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch, Inc. With his good friend and mentor Frank Reese, Danny is working to revive interest in and use of Standard Bred poultry by producing high quality market birds, judging, and through public education. Danny resides in Tampa, Kansas.

**Contact:** [brahmabrahma@hotmail.com](mailto:brahmabrahma@hotmail.com), (785) 965-2628



**R. Scott Beyer, PhD**

**Associate Professor, Poultry Nutrition  
Management, Kansas State University**

Dr. Scott Beyer attended Texas A&M University and received an undergraduate degree in Biochemistry in 1983. He obtained his Masters and Ph.D. degrees in the Animal Nutrition Program from the University of Georgia and then worked as a Post-Doctoral Research Associate for Harvard University in the Department of Nutrition. He now is an Assistant Professor at Kansas State University where he is the coach of the KSU Collegiate Poultry Judging team. Dr. Beyer is also the Poultry Extension Agent for the state of Kansas. His research focuses on feed manufacturing and poultry nutrition.

**Contact:** [sbeyer@k-state.edu](mailto:sbeyer@k-state.edu), (785) 532-1201

## Heritage Chicken Definition

-Endorsers-



**Anne Fanatico**  
Poultry Program Specialist  
National Center for Appropriate  
Technology

Anne is currently employed as a Research Associate at the Center of Excellence for Poultry Science at the University of Arkansas. Anne hold a Ph.D. from the University of Arkansas, a MS in Animal Science from Oregon State University, and a BS in Zoology and Spanish from the University of North Carolina. She worked overseas for two years in Costa Rica as a Peace Corps Volunteer specializing in agroforestry. Her areas of specialty at NCAT include small livestock; particularly pasture-based poultry production, including organic production, new marketing options, and alternative feeding.

**Contact:** [afanati@uark.edu](mailto:afanati@uark.edu)



**Kenneth E. Anderson**  
Poultry Extension Specialist & Prof. of Poultry  
and Food Science  
North Carolina State University

Prior to joining N.C. State University in 1990, Prof. Anderson spent seven years at the Dept. of Animal Science at Kansas State University. He has also spent three years in industry, as general manager of the State Line Egg Producers Cooperative Association, Inc., in Beatrice, Nebraska. Professor Anderson's extension and research responsibilities include animal welfare as impacted by molting practices, and the impact of these practices on the welfare of the laying hen. He also does research on shell egg cooling and processing; layer performance and management; and on the biological basis for chemoprevention of ovarian cancer.

**Contact:** [ken\\_anderson@ncsu.edu](mailto:ken_anderson@ncsu.edu), (919) 555-1212

# The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy

*Founded in 1977, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy is the pioneer organization in the U.S. working to conserve historic breeds and genetic diversity in livestock.*



## WHAT DOES ALBC DO?

Many rare breeds of livestock and poultry are critically endangered, yet few people know of their existence or the threat to these animals. ALBC's mission is to protect these breeds of livestock and poultry by bringing awareness, education and information to the breeders and the public.

ALBC:

- Maintains and annually updates its Conservation Priority List (CPL). This list provides an ongoing record of both the livestock and poultry in need of conservation and the progress being made to preserve it.
- Conducts research to define breed characteristics for each rare breed on the CPL, and collects census data to track and report population numbers.
- Provides technical and practical education to both ALBC members and non-members interested in raising these breeds through workshops, training sessions and printed information.
- Investigates methods of promoting these breeds and their products to help make raising them a profitable and satisfying option for farmers.

## MISSION

The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy is a nonprofit membership organization working to protect 150 breeds of livestock and poultry species from extinction by conserving their genetic diversity.

## MEMBERSHIP

ALBC currently has over 3,000 members, and includes people from a wide variety of backgrounds - both those who raise livestock and poultry and those who may not have animals, but are interested in conservation of these breeds. ALBC also works closely with related organizations such as Heifer International, RAFT, as well as historical farms, museums, and breed associations.

## FUNDING

ALBC is funded by membership dues, general contributions, foundation grants, research grants, and sales of books and ALBC-related promotional items.

*"...when the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more, another Heaven and another Earth must pass before such a one can be again."*

*-William Beebe*



The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy

PO Box 477

Pittsboro, NC 27312

(919) 542-5704

[www.albc-usa.org](http://www.albc-usa.org)

# About ALBC

## Rediscovering Traditional Meats from Historic Chicken Breeds

Article Published in the ALBC Newsletter

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.

*Gina Bisco lives in Chittenango, New York, where she raises, and eats, Chantecler chickens. For more information contact Gina at [gsb7@earthlink.net](mailto:gsb7@earthlink.net).*