

NOTES FROM A FARM

# CHICKEN LOVERS RE-JOYCE

BY JILL WARREN LUCAS



FARM SITE IN STALEY, NORTH CAROLINA

The first joke many of us learned was, *Why did the chicken cross the road?* For Ron Joyce, the punch line wasn't the whole story.

The owner of Joyce Farms in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, wasn't satisfied with commodity chicken grown in countless farms across the Piedmont. He wanted something different, something better. And not merely something he could slap an organic label on and sell for a higher price.

Forty years after patriarch Alvin Joyce launched a small wholesale business in 1962, Ron began his hunt for a heritage bird worthy of his family name, one that still looked and tasted like it did generations ago. He found it in France.

In 2003, Joyce Farms became the sole US grower of the red-feathered Poulet Rouge, which the company has trademarked as a distinct genetic brand. It has little in common with the rotund chicken that crowds supermarket chillers, or the Rhode Island Red, a popular choice among backyard farmers.

With their long legs and trim chests, these birds reside in spacious, well-ventilated chicken houses in rural Chatham County that provide easy access to grassy fields and cooling shade. They consume antibiotic-free feed developed by poultry scientists at North Carolina State University to suit their

slow-growing systems. And they are tended by career farmers who not only live onsite but actually enjoy visiting the houses, crouching and clucking while checking the flocks.

Across the road, so to speak, and at commodity farms across the country, their white-feathered cousins squawk in much tighter quarters, sometimes in complete darkness, eating feed formulated to yield maximum growth in minimum time. When ready for processing, most are so top heavy—a triumph of genetic engineering to sat-



isfy consumer preference for white meat—that their squat legs cannot support their bodies.

“That’s exactly what Dad wanted to get away from,” says Ron’s son Stuart Joyce, vice president of operations, stepping into a blue jumpsuit that covers him from head to shoe. The gear is not so much to protect him as to shield birds from external contaminants, like the avian flu virus that devastated some Midwestern farms last year. “It takes more work to raise Poulet Rouge, but you get a much better chicken.”

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While a paper face mask helps with dust, there is scant odor in the houses. The shavings on the floor are feather-covered but dry. When an auger cranks every few minutes, releasing fresh feed into a series of red bowls suspended along the 400-foot length of the barn, hundreds of birds scurry into place. Others lazily perch on the equally long pipe that steadily releases droplets of water that gleam in sunlight.

“They live good,” says Charlie Coble, who



CHARLIE COBLE

manages a Joyce Farms site in Staley, North Carolina. He built the spread himself forty-five years ago when his late wife mentioned she’d like to raise chickens. Early on, he grew upwards of 18,000 birds in each of three houses for a major national brand, flipping flocks every forty-two days when chickens swelled to about five and a half pounds.

By contrast, Joyce Farms sets the maximum capacity for Poulet Rouge at 8,000, with about 800 birds pulled at seven weeks for processing as poussin, similar to capons. Remaining chickens grow for a total of eighty-four days and weigh about four and a half pounds at harvest. Houses are idle four weeks for deep cleaning, then replenished with a new flock from the Winston-Salem hatchery.

“This is so much better than it used to be,” says Coble, recalling how disoriented birds in crowded barns would die unnoticed, causing stress among survivors and increasing the risk of contamination. He playfully calls out “yoo-hoo!” and a chirping group gathered by a wire fence falls suddenly silent, staring at him inquisitively. Coble chuckles and releases a stream of tobacco juice over his shoulder onto the gravel driveway.

“I never was a big fan of how we used to do things,” says his son, Greg Coble, who lives here and farms part time. “The program now is more humane. It’s the right thing to do.”

Automated processes of the past caused Larry Lemons to live in fear of power outages. “The ways things were set up, if the fan stopped you could lose a whole house in ten minutes,” says Lemons, who runs a second operation for Joyce Farms nearby in Siler City, North Caro-

lina. “With open ventilation, natural light and outdoor access, we have cleaner air and healthier, happier chickens.”

Stuart says the birds are treated better after processing, too. Iced water and chlorine dips are commonly used to chill and clean birds in mechanized plants. Joyce Farms prides itself on managing all steps by hand, cooling birds with air-chilling alone, and washing with ozone water, a natural oxidant proven to destroy bacteria.

All this care produces a smaller, more costly chicken—but one that is prized by chefs for its robust flavor and thin skin. Stuart credits this to the way Poulet Rouge fat, which is marbled within the meat, remains a buttery yellow and crisps when cooked.

“It doesn’t need to be brined or covered with sauce the way other birds do just to taste like something,” says Stuart, whose jacket bears the company motto “Mother Nature Meets Haute Cuisine.” He says a little salt and pepper is all you need.

While Joyce Farms chicken is sold through the company website and Whole Foods Market stores in the Southeast, the majority of its product goes to premier chefs through a handful of



POULET ROUGE

food service vendors.

Chef Steven Satterfield, a finalist for this year’s Best Chef Southeast award from the James Beard Foundation, serves Poulet Rouge at Miller Union in Atlanta. He respects the grower’s commitment to sustainable agriculture.

“The dark meat requires a bit more cooking since these chickens use their legs much more than factory farmed birds,” says Satterfield, who also sources grass-fed beef from Joyce Farms. “It has a deeper, more pronounced flavor. I always say that their chicken tastes more like chicken.”

And that’s worth crossing the road for.

PHOTOS BY LIZ NEMETH