



# Better Bird?

*Clemmons poultry producer reaches into the past for a tastier chicken*

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**J**oyce Foods is hoping to give new, or renewed, meaning to the phrase “tastes like chicken.” In recent years, that phrase has come to mean that a food tastes so bland that it could be anything. Food experts routinely attribute the blandness of today’s industrial or commodity chicken — the standard in mainstream supermarkets — to industrial growing practices and crossbreeding.

**Joyce Foods**, a specialty poultry producer in Clemmons, has harkened back to old-fashioned growing practices and a heritage breed to produce what the company calls a better-tasting bird.

In August of last year, Joyce Foods introduced Poulet Rouge Fermier, its new brand of red JA *cou nu*, a red-feathered French heritage breed of chicken with a distinctive naked, or featherless, neck. The company breeds, hatches and raises the birds on several small farms in Chatham County, near Siler City, then processes the birds in Clemmons.

The company processes about 2,400 chickens a week and primarily sells them up and down the East Coast, targeting fine-dining restaurants and dedicated chefs willing to pay a premium price for a better bird.

“We sell a lot in New York,



DENIS DRONNE



RON JOYCE

Miami and Atlanta,” said Denis Dronne, a native of France and veteran chef who has been handling Joyce Foods’ new product development and sales for the past 18 months. Customers in this area include Fabian’s restaurant on Reynolda Road.

Ron Joyce, the owner of Joyce Foods, became a believer in older growing practices and heritage breeds more or less out of necessity. In fact, the business that his father, Alvin Joyce, started in 1962, has evolved a lot over the years.

“My dad’s business relied on distributing chicken to mom-and-pop stores,” he said. “The chains pretty much put those out of business.”

Later, Joyce Foods became a regular distributor to KFC franchises, and entered the processing

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business when those restaurants needed chicken cut into pieces.

Eventually, large companies squeezed Joyce's small company out of that business, too, with automated and very expensive machines that could cut up dozens of birds in a minute.

So in 1995, Joyce started the Ashley Farms brand of all-natural chicken, and he made the final switch from distributor to producer in 2001.

Joyce Foods still sells commodity breeds of all-natural chicken under the Ashley Farms and Tanglewood Farms brands. But with so many big companies getting into all-natural and organic chicken, Joyce is looking for yet another niche. In doing so, he has learned that the secret to getting a really great chicken is matching the right breed with the right growing practices. "That was like a big light flashing, when I realized what should have been so obvious," he said.

Joyce and Dronne said they think that even companies trying to produce organic and free-range chicken are on the wrong track. In general, they are still using the same commercial breeds — Ross, Cobb and Hubbard — that are not well-suited to roaming in pastures, Joyce said.

Joyce decided that enough chefs and sophisticated customers of fine-dining restaurants would pay more for the right breed of chicken, grown the right way.

He first tried a Canadian breed that was a cross of the French heritage breed and an industrial breed. But he wasn't satisfied with that. "We decided we wanted the real thing," he said. "At first, the French were reluctant. They didn't think there was a market in the United States. And they were wondering about who we were."

**Eventually, Joyce Foods** was able to buy breeding stock from France and bring it to the United States, becoming the first and only U.S. company to do so.

Though not technically part of the Label Rouge program set up for heritage breeds in France, Joyce Foods is voluntarily following the program's strict guidelines, which govern almost all aspects of getting the chicken to market.

The program not only requires the use of a heritage breed, but also dictates the birds' diet, the size of the chicken houses, the

maximum number of birds in each house, and the minimum amount of time that the birds spend outside.

The program even requires that the chickens travel no more than two hours or 64 miles to the processing plant and that they are sold fresh within nine days after processing.

Industrial chickens are bred to grow quickly and are raised in small confined spaces. "They have been crossbred to match market demand," Dronne said. "So they grow fast and have large breasts and small legs."

Because they live only about six weeks, industrial chickens never develop immune systems and can't handle outdoor living because of the risk of disease.

**In contrast**, the Poulet Rouge Fermier birds take twice the time, 12 weeks, to grow to the same size as industrial chickens, and they do it in roomy, small chicken houses with plenty of fresh air. After their immune systems develop at 6 weeks of age, they are allowed outside, making them "free-range."

This French breed eats an all-grain diet with no animal products, just like chickens raised before industrial farming came into prominence.

"This is just like backyard chickens used to be," Dronne said.

Dronne and Joyce said that one key factor that makes these superior chickens is the slow growth process. Over the 12 weeks, the birds have a chance to develop more flavor and better texture, they said. Also, the development of their immune systems make them hardier, more resistant to disease and less likely to need medication.

This breed produces a texture that is firm but not tough. "It's not spongy like commodity chicken," Dronne said.

Because of the longer life and living conditions, the breasts are a bit smaller and elongated, and the legs are longer.

The dark meat is darker and especially flavorful. The thin skin means that the chicken has less fat.

It's especially good for roasting whole, Dronne said.

In fact, Joyce Foods sells only whole birds. And given the special breed, long growing season and other factors, these chickens are not cheap.

Joyce said that a New York restaurant was selling a whole roasted chicken for two people for \$65. In a trial retail run with Lowes Foods, the company's Robinhood Road store has started selling the chickens. They go for \$3 a pound, compared to

about \$1 a pound for a whole industrial chicken.

Dronne's job is to show people that it's worth it and to create a market for the Poulet Rouge Fermier brand.

"We saw that these birds have 30 percent of the market in France. Here it's zero," he said. "We want to change that, but it's going to be a long process."

"More and more people want meat grown in better conditions, that makes better meat. But it costs three times as much. So it's hard."

Joyce and Dronne have been talking with more retailers about getting these chickens in stores, especially natural-food and specialty stores. Joyce also plans to do more with heritage turkeys and ducks.

He's already planning to move his hatchery closer to his home base in Clemmons. He also would like to find land nearby, maybe in Davie or Yadkin county, where he could move his growing operations.

**Down at one** of the farms where his chickens are grown in Chatham County, Joyce showed how his company works hard to treat the birds humanely.

His chicken houses are 300 feet long, compared to the 500 feet typical of industrial chicken houses. Each house has 7,200 chickens. Larger companies raising industrial breeds would put more than 12,000 chickens in the same space, said Billy Wilkie, who owns a farm that Joyce Foods uses.

Wilkie, 74, said he hasn't seen birds anything like these since his childhood — and he dealt with large chicken companies for more than 40 years. "One thing about these birds is they don't die. With other birds, you'd have 500 die in the first week. These are healthy."

Wilkie also said that these birds aren't nearly so skittish — a problem that causes pileups in which birds can get suffocated. "These are so much calmer," he said. "You can walk through the house and they'll follow you just like a little dog."

Dronne said that their growing practices are designed not only to keep the birds healthy, but also to allow them to express their natural behaviors.

"They are not the smartest animals around, but like everybody else they like to have a good life," Dronne said. "They like to sun themselves. They like to give themselves a dust bath."

"For 12 weeks, they're happy chickens."