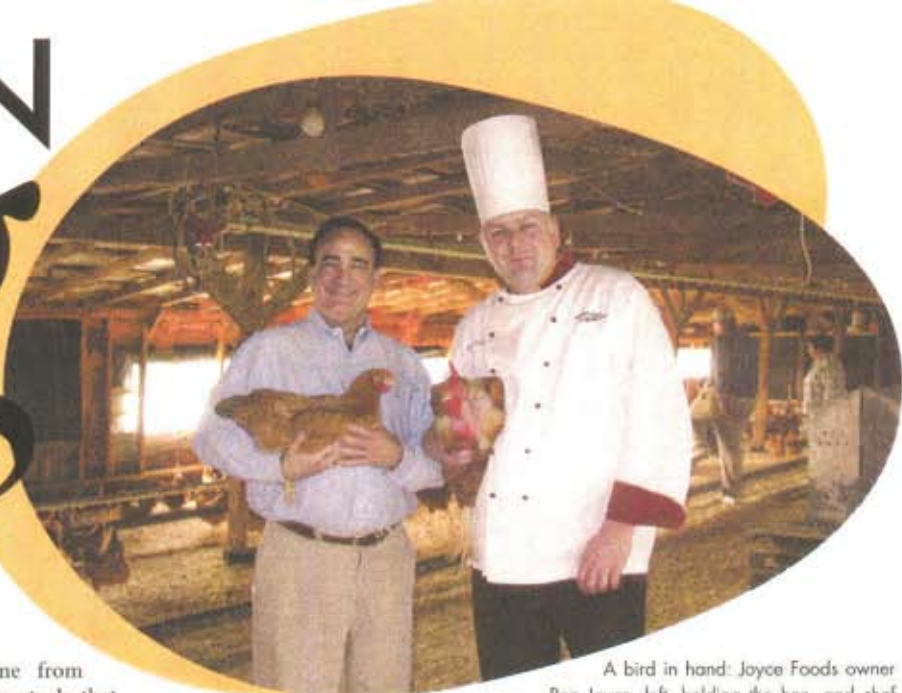


# the GOLDEN egg

Hatching a  
new breed  
of chicken

by Lisa Shames



A bird in hand: Joyce Foods owner Ron Joyce, left, holding the hen, and chef Denis Dronne, director of operations and product development, holding the rooster.

At first glance, these chickens look a bit strange. With their naked necks and elongated breasts and legs, some might even call them ugly. But after spending more than a year with his new flock, Winston-Salem, N.C.-based Joyce Foods' owner Ron Joyce, like a proud father, calls them "absolutely beautiful." And he's betting that American chefs will think so, too.

Following in the tradition of France's Label Rouge poultry, known for its premium taste and high production standards, Joyce has created a new breed of chicken for high-end chefs in the United States.

He's up for the task, too, having grown up in the business—his father owned a small poultry wholesale company selling primarily to independent grocery stores. In 1981, after Joyce took over the operation, Joyce Foods evolved into one of the largest independent chicken processor/distributor in the Carolinas and Virginia, supplying product to fast-food restaurants.

By the early 1990s, Joyce was looking to diversify, and in 1995 Ashley Farms was born, producing and distributing specialty products aimed at fine dining restaurants and gourmet retail markets. "My goal at the time was to produce the best all-natural chicken in the country," Joyce says, which he feels they've accomplished.

All of the products—whether they be chicken, poussin, French guinea, quail, partridge, turkey or pheasant—are raised humanely, without hormones or antibiotics, and fed only natural grains with no animal by-products. By 2001, Joyce saw where his company's future lay and sold off the fast-food distribution part of his business.

## First comes the egg

Joyce first heard about a Label Rouge-type product in the United States more than 10 years ago, when he was contacted about further processing and distribution by Wilson Fields in Kentucky. The company was creating a similar product by crossing a commercial chicken with one from France. "It was halfway there of what we're doing now," says Joyce. But after a year and a half the investors pulled out and the company went out of business.

Label Rouge—which started 40 years ago in France as a grassroots movement led by farmers who were tired with the industrialization of the country's chicken farming—focuses on high-quality products, predominantly meat, with poultry being its primary offering. This pasture-raised poultry from small

farms come from old genetic stock that produces a slow-growing bird. It's this longer growing period coupled with strict standards and restrictions on feed, housing, outdoor access and medication that work together to create what many feel is a superior-tasting product.

Joyce became convinced that in order to produce "the best-tasting chicken in the world"—his next goal—he'd have to start with a different bird.

He first looked into importing Label Rouge chickens directly from France. But by the time the birds would go through all the bureaucratic red tape, including customs and inspection by the USDA and Fish and Wildlife, it wouldn't be realistic. In 2003, while attending a SIAL show in Montreal, Joyce hoped to find some French Canadians who were doing something similar. But the genetics of those birds didn't measure up to his standards.

That's when Joyce had a light-bulb moment: "I came to the realization that if we were going to do it, we would have to grow the product here," he says.

Enter Denis Dronne, a classically trained French chef who joined the company as director of operations and product development. Having worked all over the world, including five years at the United Nations in the delegates dining room, Dronne was very familiar with Label Rouge products.

Off the two went to France, spending eight days visiting the farmers who raise these chickens, as well as the processing plants. They then contacted one of the two French companies that keep the genetics for these older heritage breeds. At first they were reluctant, says Joyce, but "once they realized we are a small company and we weren't interested in stealing the genetics, they got more comfortable."

Working with a geneticist from Hubbard-ISA, Saint Loup D'Ordon, the exact bloodline was chosen, the "poulet cou nu" (i.e., naked-neck chicken; females, however, have feathered necks). From there the eggs came to the United States and, after being hatched in quarantine and tested to make sure they were disease-free, the birds were released to the farm.

## And then the chickens

By mid-July of this year—"if the chickens have read the charts," laughs Joyce—these birds will be available to chefs, primarily those on the East Coast. With production initially expected to be small—about 2,400 chickens a week—Joyce plans on gradually increasing

production. (To put those numbers in perspective, the United States processes somewhere between 156 and 158 million chickens a week, says Joyce.)

The European chefs the company has contacted in the United States who are familiar with the Label Rouge program are very excited about receiving and working with the product, says Dronne. But he's not surprised. "The flavor will be superior to anything we have here in this country," he says. "A lot of chefs are looking for the best ingredients available. There is nothing that will come close to this."

In addition to a "deeper chicken flavor," says Dronne, these birds have a thinner skin which "crisps up nicely" and are lower in fat than commercial breeds. Adds Joyce: "For the first time, chefs in America will have chickens of the same quality as those in Europe."

## Home on the range

Because they grow slower—70 to 84 days as opposed to 40 to 42 for commercial chickens—their immune systems are heartier, says Dronne, which makes them perfect to raise free-range. Both Joyce and Dronne strongly believe that American commercial chickens have immune systems too fragile to be let outside. For that reason, the white-feathered chickens from Ashley Farms and Tanglewood Farms—another brand at Joyce Foods—are kept indoors where they are less prone to disease.

The product is also in line with many of the ethical concerns that chefs are interested in today. Joyce says they follow the stringent Label Rouge standards and in some areas take it further. (The French label does allow some antibiotics to be administered, which is something Joyce won't do.) The chickens are kept in houses with screens, providing an abundance of fresh air and sunlight, plus they have access to a pasture. Their all-grain diet has been specially formulated for them.

And the birds are being raised on small family farms, which, according to Joyce, makes a difference. "The farmers take a personal interest in these animals," he says. "At one farm, the farmer's wife has all but named them."

For more information, call (336) 766-9900 or visit [www.joycefoods.com](http://www.joycefoods.com).