

Chickens roam freely at Ferme Auberge du Poirier
in Montrevel en Bresse, France.



In a world of dollar McDonald's
burgers and cheap ramen, is
there a place for €100 chicken?

A Flight of Fancy

France's Poulet de Bresse

By Crystal Cun

SILENCE. It can stem from an awkward faux pas, or follow the sadness of a tragedy. But this silence was different, the sort that envelopes the dining room as the chatter of conversation subsides into the faint clink of forks. The kind that signals complete focus on the food in front of you, as mouths chew in synchronized satisfaction. This was a silence that can only be obtained when the meal supersedes all other priorities, drowning all distractions, as you are single-mindedly driven to plunge headlong into the plate.

Perturbed at the quiet, the chef poked his head into the dining room. "Is everything okay?" he

asked. "Yes, yes! It's quiet, it's perfect," we replied in unison. "Oh, all right," he said. "I was simply wondering if you had all left." I smiled to myself and lifted a forkful of chicken to my mouth. A trail of golden drippings soaked into the bed of mashed potatoes below.

Chicken may be popularly regarded as one of the most generic meats on the market, but this was no ordinary chicken on the table. I had arrived at Ferme Auberge du Poirier, seeking more information about the famed Bresse chicken of Burgundy.

Along the way, I hoped to discover what exactly made these birds so special, and why they



Two chickens face-off in a friendly tussle.

Photo: Wendy Stuart

commanded such extraordinarily high prices. After all, the price for chapon can easily run upwards of €30/kg. With a minimum weight of three kg per chapon...well, you can do the math. Next, consider the myriad alternative foods available for significantly less. In a world of dollar McDonald's burgers and cheap ramen, is there a place for €100 chicken?

BRESSE chicken has a long, storied history in France, and brochures from the Interprofessional Committee of Bresse Poultry trumpet this prestigious position unabashedly. "Il y a des champagnes...et le Dom Pérignon! Des automobiles...et la

Rolls! Du caviar...et le Béluga! De meme, il y a des poulets et il y a le Poulet de Bresse!" This is the only chicken that has received an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) designation, which means that it is closely protected by French regulations to enforce traditional production methods.

To fully impart the terroir of the region, Bresse chicken is raised only in parts of the Ain, Jura and Saône-et-Loire departments, and must feed on pastures and cereals from those areas.

There are three types of Bresse chicken that are produced, the standard poulet de Bresse (raised to 16+ weeks), the chapon de Bresse (castrated male raised

to 32+ weeks), and the poularde de Bresse (non-laying hen raised to 20+ weeks). Although over 1.2 million birds are raised annually, domestic demand for Bresse chicken is so high that 95% of the poultry is sold within France.

AT Ferme Auberge du Poirier, farmer, chef, maître d', porter and proprietor Joël Billet greeted us with a hearty handshake and gregariously said, "Bonjour et bienvenue!"

Stepping inside the farmhouse, I was immediately set at ease, with a gently swaying grandfather clock tucked into the corner, fresh spiderwebs spun around the wrought-iron ceiling lamps, and a collection of mis-

matched china in the cabinets. Assorted trophies and plaques were stacked under the polished mirror, a testament to the many accolades Ferme Auberge du Poirier has received for its chicken over the years. Above the azure-fringed placemat, there was a mosaic of ruby salad greens, tomato, carrot, and delicate slices of hard-boiled egg. The fragrance of fresh daffodils filled the air.

Billet introduced himself to us, explaining that he was formerly a chef in Switzerland, but had decided to make a career switch to farming. He chose to invest in this farm property, and though the start-up period was a struggle, he was proud to have survived 18 years in business. "What's the secret to success?" Billet grinned wryly. "Hard work, that's all. I work about 105 hours a week, and *les jeunes* work maybe 35 hours a week. I work three of their weeks in the time that they work one!"

Though he gets some help from his wife and son, it is primarily Billet who oversees every step of production, from the grains to the chickens to the kitchen. "The key is to have passion," said Billet. "Also, it helps if you are a little crazy."

Back in the dining room, the parade of food had happily not ended. The roasted poulet de Bresse was followed by an ivory scoop of fromage blanc à la crème, a raw milk cheese

crowned with fresh cream. This specialty of the Burgundy region can be eaten with a bit of salt or coarse sugar sprinkled on top, as you prefer.

Finally, we were treated to a rustic prune tart, with fruit picked from the trees outside. "The fruit, it's



Joël Billet proudly displays a member of his flock.

almost moving," I joked. Lively conversation flowed around me, drifting from debate on whether salads ought to be placed at the beginning or end of a meal, to the Finnish tradition of keeping infants' names secret until they are baptized at four months.

Then, to much glee and excitement, Billet returned to the din-

ing room, this time with a live demonstration. Though the surrounding hubbub was cacophonous, the chicken appeared unruffled as it was cradled in Billet's arms. With pure white feathers, blue-tinted legs and bright red comb, it bore a distinct likeness to the tricolor French flag.

AFTER the hearty lunch, Billet provided a tour of the farm and its operations. Under the Burgundy sun, chickens happily squawked, frolicked, and chased each other around the wide expanse of fields. By law, they are mandated to live and eat outdoors, feeding on insects, cereals and milk products of the terroir.

Ferme Auberge du Poirier also holds a herd of 60 Charolais cows, which graze on the 35 hectares of pasture. "The cows will come to me if I call them," commented Billet. "You can do that only if you see the animals every day. I don't want my animals to suffer, and I kill them out of necessity, but I want to make sure they suffer less than they would on large industrial farms." Once the cattle finish mowing the grass, the flock of chickens will be rotated onto those fields to pick through the flies and worms left by the cow manure.

The chickens are kept outside until the last few weeks of their lives, when they are brought inside the coop for fattening. All birds are killed on site with a quick incision inside the throat, after the chicken is knocked out. To be recognized as an authentic Bresse chicken, it must be sold with its head attached, and it is further identified by metal bands and tags indicating the product's origin.

Each year, Ferme Auberge du Poirier raises and sells 3,000 birds, which are sold directly to consumers. "We don't ship to Marseilles or Paris," said Bil-

let, "because the birds keep getting delayed in Paris and stolen in Marseilles." About 1,200 chickens will be sold during the Christmas holiday season, in vacuum sealed packs complete with cooking directions. The most elegant preparation simply calls for roasting the bird with a little butter, salt, and pepper, since the quality of chicken's meat and natural fat allows the bird to shine on its own.

OF course, all of this comes at a significant cost. The poulet de Bresse runs about €9/kg, while a whole chapon will set you back about €30/kg. Why

is the price of these chickens so much more than their conventional counterparts? The flavor of the meat is certainly better, but is it really worth the staggering price premium? Is this not simply an elitist luxury product that is out of the reach of most working-class families?

Stroking his chin, Billet stepped back for a moment to consider his business. "When I started this farm, I wanted to show that

there were alternative ways of creating products and making human food without degrading the environment," he mused. "Respect for the animal is very important as well. When people know the background of this product, the price is not a problem. But if they don't, they will go to Carrefour and buy two chickens for €4, while we sell one for €30. Here, I purchase a chick for €4 at the beginning of its life."

While the price tags on the factory-farmed chickens may look cheap, in reality, they hide a slew of social and environmental costs. No payments are made for the tolls exacted by groundwater pollution or the spread of avian flu. In contrast, the Bresse chicken more accurately reflects the true cost of raising a chicken in a healthy, sustainable manner. Billet concluded, "These chickens don't live in the same world at all."

Eating sustainably farmed meat does inflict a much harder hit on your wallet though, which means you cannot feast on meat every night. "But isn't it better to eat better chicken once in a while than bad chicken all the time?" Billet asked.

The answer to that question will help decide the future of food around the world.

For more information on the purchase of Bresse chicken or dining at the restaurant at Ferme Auberge du Poirier, please see www.fermeaubergedupoirier.fr. The farm exports poultry internationally during Christmas season, and the restaurant is open for business on week-ends or by group request. ♣



Top: roasted Bresse chicken atop a purée of potatoes
Bottom: some of Ferme Auberge du Poirier's many awards