

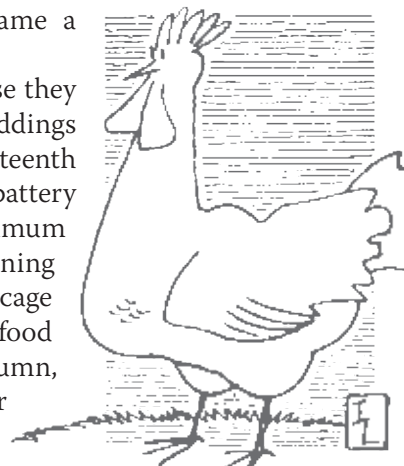


POULTRY AND EGGS

BEFORE THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, when the Lancashire population was largely rural, most families might have had a few chickens and perhaps a duck or two, or a pair of geese scratching a living outside the cottage door. Through the spring and summer the hens would produce eggs, though in winter egg production would stop. A cockerel would run with the hens and some of the eggs would be incubated. Some of the resulting chickens would go to next year's flock; the rest, as well as those past the egg-laying stage, would go in the pot. And the main feast day of the year, Christmas, was traditionally celebrated not with a turkey (an import from the United States of America) but with a goose.

Most families who went to live in the growing mill towns could no longer keep their own poultry, so eggs had to be purchased from the meagre income and eating chicken became a special treat.

Hens' eggs were, of course, in great demand because they were often an essential ingredient in making the puddings and cakes so enjoyed by Lancastrians in the late nineteenth and through most of the twentieth centuries. So the battery method of producing vast numbers of eggs at minimum cost was developed. Battery sheds were set up containing hundreds of small cages in three tiers, and in each cage were stuffed three hens. They were provided with food and water, and to stop them 'going off the lay' in autumn, electric lights were switched on at night to fool their hormones that it was still summer. There was a



Free range chickens are happy chickens sheltering from the rain in this photograph.

problem in that the three hens in a tiny cage would get bored and start to peck at each other. The solution was straightforward. The battery hens were de-beaked, a third of the upper beak being burnt off with a special tool. Then special breeds of battery hens were produced. When they started to lay on day one the farmer would know to within a day or two when they all would stop laying. He could then slaughter the lot and next day bring in a new lot of hens. It was all an economic miracle.

It was then discovered that it was possible to produce breeds of hens that would convert a high proportion of their food intake into meat very quickly and that had less bone and other waste in the carcass. Thousands were – and still are – packed into sheds where they have just enough room to turn round. There they feed and grow. After a few days many may be killed to produce the poussin that we see in the supermarkets, hyped up by the well-advertised 'delicious spatch-cocked chicken'. Those raising the chickens know precisely what day all the birds in their shed will weight 2½ pounds and 3½ pounds, the size wanted by the retailers, because growth is so constant in these genetically selected birds. And those poor birds are what we see sold as plain 'chicken'. It's cheap. It's full of protein (and antibiotics).



It's convenient. But look carefully at the legs of the chicken. Often they are not strong enough to stand upright, so they crouch with their yellow legs touching the litter that is fouled by their droppings. And there on the legs are the brown or black burns caused by contact with the acrid droppings.

Such eggs and chickens have no place among the flavours of Lancashire. You can buy, at farms, farmers' markets and even in the better supermarkets, free-range eggs and chickens that have spent their short but happy lives wandering around in the sunshine.

They may cost a little more, but they are humanely cared for and taste far better.

EGGS CHOPPED UP IN A CUP

Take a couple of boiled eggs, shell while hot and chop finely with a little butter, salt and pepper. Put this into a cup and eat with a teaspoon.

This was a Lancashire cure for all sorts of fairly minor ailments, from the common cold to influenza.

Hindle Wakes

Hindle wakes is a corruption of 'hen of the wake', the chicken that would be eaten on a wake or feast day (see page 96). Then the chicken would not be the young, fat and tender chicken that we enjoy today, but a scrawny old hen or cock that would take several hours of slow cooking before it was tender. This is a very old Lancashire dish.

First of all find a large free-range chicken, ideally in the four- to six-pound size bracket. A good farm shop or farmers' market should be able to provide one.

Soak a pound of dried prunes in water (or, preferably, cold tea) for twelve hours. De-stone and chop up the prunes and mix with four ounces of breadcrumbs, a finely chopped onion, salt and pepper, and some finely chopped parsley, sage and thyme. Moisten this stuffing with lemon juice and then stuff the neck of the bird and (loosely) the body cavity of the bird. Stitch up the opening at the rear of the bird to prevent the stuffing there escaping. Put the chicken into a large pan and cover with cold water. Add a glass of white wine, a chopped onion and seasoning. Bring to the boil and then gently simmer until the bird is tender. That will be about three hours for a large young chicken, but may take a

little longer if the bird has been building up its legs muscles and sinews by wandering wherever it wanted. Leave the bird in the liquid to go cold.

Melt an ounce of butter in a saucepan and stir in half an ounce of plain flour. Cook for one minute, stirring continually. Then add cold stock from the pan a little at a time, heating and stirring continually until you have a creamy sauce. Into that squeeze the juice of one lemon. Cover the surface of the sauce with greaseproof paper or the paper from around a pound of butter (this prevents a skin forming on the sauce) and let the sauce cool.

Serve the chicken coated with sauce, and the stuffing in a separate dish. This goes well with a segment of lemon, new potatoes and a green salad.

The Perfect Free-Range Chicken

Take a chicken weighing about three pounds and slip your fingers between the skin and meat at the neck end of the breast. Push your fingers further so that there is a gap between the breast meat and skin. Remove your fingers and slide between meat and skin several quarter-inch slabs of butter (cut them from a block of butter taken from the fridge).

Take two oranges and peel the zest from them. Place the chicken in a roasting tin on the orange zest and some fresh sprigs of thyme and parsley, and roast in a moderately hot oven for ten minutes before turning the oven down to moderate. Cooking time is about half an hour per pound of bird, but check by sticking the point of a knife into the base of the thighs. When the juices run clear the bird is cooked; if they are pink with blood put the chicken back in the oven.

After about three quarters of an hour of the cooking time, start to baste the chicken with the melted butter and juices in the pan every quarter of an hour until the bird is cooked.

Serve the chicken with the herby, orangey, buttery contents of the roasting tin as a sauce.