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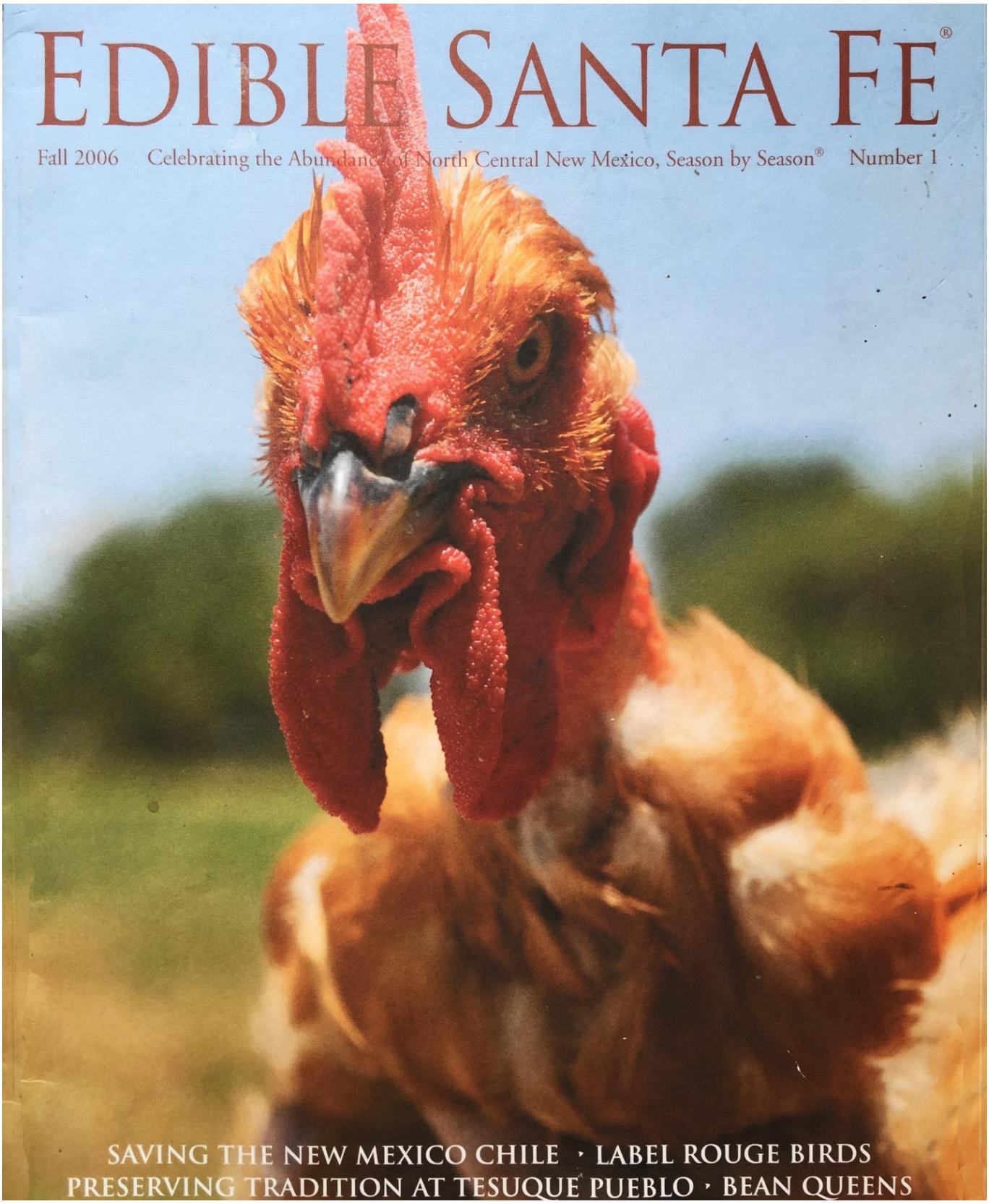


SAVING THE NEW MEXICO CHILE · LABEL ROUGE BIRDS
PRESERVING TRADITION AT TESUQUE PUEBLO · BEAN QUEENS

ARTISANS

BY DEBORAH MADISON

THE RED LABEL BIRD WITH GOLD MEDAL FLAVOR

Red Label Chickens come to New Mexico.

I knew the name pertained to chickens, but what kind of a bird was La Belle Rouge?

I gathered it was a beautiful red chicken, but what else? Curious, I called Don Bixby of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, my main information source when it comes to rare breeds. "It's not a breed, it's a protocol," Don explained, leaving me baffled until I discovered that it's not *la belle*, but *label*. Label Rouge. Red Label.

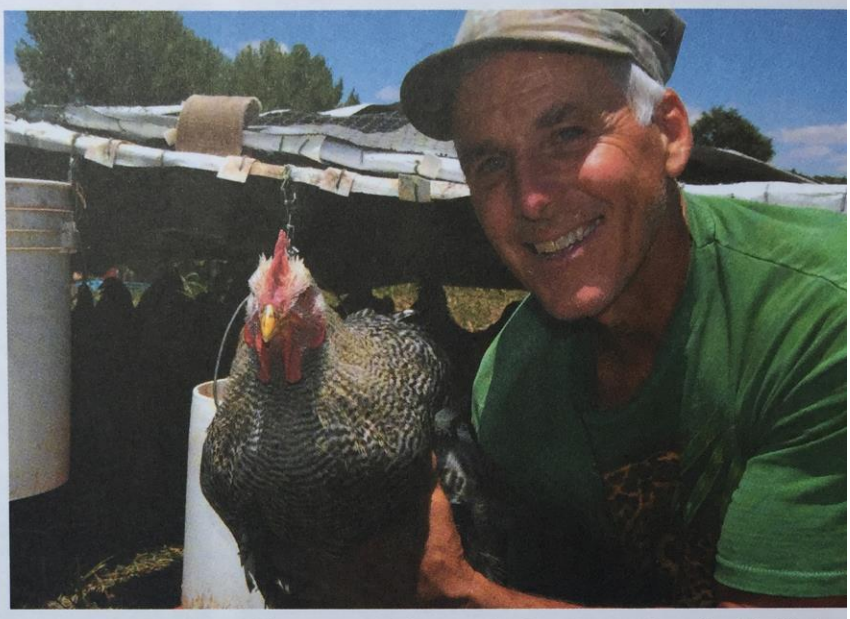
Eventually, Don confessed that he had experienced the same confusion. But now we know: it's a brand. The name is a sign, like a blue ribbon or gold medal, that suggests one can expect excellence; in this case, a very good chicken. Not merely an advertising gimmick, the quality is real.

And Label Rouge chickens are not something imported from France—they're now here in New Mexico. Thanks to Tom Delehanty and his ranch, Pollo Real, we can now experience what savvy French shoppers have known for the past 40 years: that chicken can really taste how chicken should taste, and it's nothing like what usually passes for chicken in this country.

Those who know about Joel Salatin and Polyface Farm's innovative chicken tractors, Pollo Real's chicken yurts, and other systems designed to allow birds to range freely on grass might think that these innovative methods started here. But the whole idea of grazing chickens as a production system actually started in France in the 1960s when some visionary farmers, frustrated by the poor quality of post-war industrialized chicken and poor economics of farming, put together a pasture-based system that would not only produce better tasting birds, but would produce better income for farmers and reinvigorate rural communities. The program, called Label Rouge, covers other kinds of fowl as well as meats, but pasture-raised chicken is its leading product. It's been successful in accomplishing its various goals.

The main goal of Label Rouge was, most simply, to produce a superior tasting bird, a chicken that was reminiscent of the farmyard birds so many people had grown up with. Excellent flavor is a hallmark of the program's success, so much so that regular taste-tests are conducted to make sure that any participant's birds are of such high quality that they are, in the program's words, "vividly distinguishable" from conventionally raised chickens. Not just better, but vividly so.

This superior flavor is gained by putting a great number of protocols in place, the most important one having to do with the genetics of the birds. Label Rouge uses slow-growing birds that take three months to reach maturity in contrast to the six weeks allotted for the industrial Cornish crossbreed. These hybrid birds bred from "rustic" stock, are big, hearty chickens that are innately well suited to life outdoors. Tellingly, two of the four breeds used in the Label Rouge program are called "rangers" because they tend to range far and wide for good things to eat. Being older and kept outdoors except at night results in chicken that not only has good flavor, but also has a firm, pleasing texture.



Above: Tom Delehanty and a Grey Ranger. **Opposite**: The birds of Label Rouge in a chicken yurt at Pollo Real.

Of course many things must be in place to achieve high quality besides the breed, and that's where a long list of protocols and practices come into play. For example, the birds are given non-medicated feed. They're never fed any animal products or given growth stimulants or other inappropriate additives. They are allowed a minimum life span of 12 weeks, and cannot be subjected to a journey of more than two hours or 64 miles to a processing plant. Their beaks are not removed nor are their toes trimmed. Whether fenced or not, the chickens are raised in open air—truly in the out-doors, not just given a patch of grass to walk onto. One picture I've seen shows the birds ranging in an unfenced forest. The chickens are housed at night, but the buildings are limited as to the number of birds that can inhabit them, and there can be only four buildings per farm. In between flocks, the farm area must be rested for at least three weeks, which is good for the health of the farm.

The list of rules goes on regarding weight, stock density, feed rations and so forth in great detail. Judgment as to how well the standards are met is given by a third party, but, in spite of the strictness of the program's standards, members tend to surpass them, not unlike those organic farmers here who grow to a higher standard than that allowed by the USDA. Label Rouge standards, however, are higher than the USDA's to begin with. Industrial natural and organic chicken are raised pretty much like other factory-farmed birds. The birds are pushed through their life cycle in six short weeks, which is hard on them. They're also debeaked and clipped, they're kept in crowded conditions and that so-called access to the outdoors happens only in the last week of their life. By then they have no interest in going out-of-doors because they don't know what it is.

While it's not so hard for a restaurant to claim that its chicken is organic, if it's industrial organic, you may not find it much more appealing than eating a regular, cheaper supermarket chicken.

All of the protocols demanded by the Label Rouge program result in healthy, well-developed, good-tasting birds. As you would expect, they cost more than industrial birds, but that hasn't kept Label Rouge from being a success for over 40 years. Today it commands 30 percent of the poultry market in France, despite that the cost to the customer is considerably higher. The French are, after all, known to value quality and taste more than Americans do, but a lot of us care about these things too, and are willing to pay the higher price for high quality and simply enjoy it less often.

Delehanty and his wife, Tracey have been feeding Northern New Mexico good, organic, truly pastured chicken for the past 10 years. Until now, they've been raising the industry's standard bird, the Cornish cross, but that is about to end.

"Increasingly," Delahanty explained recently over lunch, "we've found problems with the birds. The eggs come contaminated with E. coli and septicemia, but the company won't tell us that, or provide us with a test, so I have to take my chicks in to have them tested for disease and contamination, which is especially important for us since we don't use the antibiotics that are part and parcel of large scale industrial poultry. This isn't the case in Europe. The French chickens are thoroughly tested by the breeders for all important viruses and diseases, including avian flu, before they're sent out; they're far more rigorous in their standards, so we feel much better about their quality."

Delahanty also points out that compared to the giants of the chicken industry, Pollo Real is far too small to be heard let alone catered to, so essentially it's not a situation that can improve. While Pollo Real's grazing methods, organic feed, and better care have resulted in excellent chicken, Delahanty, who comes from generations of Wisconsin chicken farmers and has a feel for the old barnyard breeds, has longed to be

Photographs: Carole Topalian

doing something with more interesting breeds of birds. I wondered if he was interested in raising old American varieties, such as those watched over by the American Livestock Conservancy Board.

"The great birds!" Delahanty says, "but far too slow growing to make sense commercially. They take even…longer to mature."

So it turns out that the rustic hybrids in the Label Rouge program fit his needs far better than old breeds. As for their flavor, that was confirmed when the Delahantys traveled to Italy two years ago to attend Terra Madre, the meeting of 5,000 small scale food producers from 132 countries put on by Slow Food International. There they were able to taste some Red Label bird that had been brought to the gigantic food fair by some French poultry farmers.

"They kept giving us these little pieces," Delahanty recalls, "but even so they tasted like a good yard bird. We really like it."

Eventually a breeder came to the U.S. via France, England and Canada and started raising the hybrid chickens—Poulet Nu, a reddish brown bird with a naked neck; the Gourmet Black, "which looks a lot like a Barred Rock," Delahanty says, as well as the Bronze and Gray Rangers, vigorous foragers that like to roam far for their food. Right now, the rangers are the new birds at Pollo Real—the Nus and the Gourmet Blacks are yet to arrive. I asked Delahanty what it was like working with new breeds of birds after so many years with the Cornish crosses.

"They're beautiful!" He enthused. "Their colors are just gorgeous and they have these long legs and handsome heads. They stand a lot taller and they're much more active than the other birds. You'll never see them park themselves by the feed. They go right out into the yard and graze. They need less protein than other birds, but even so, they grow pretty fast, and with those longer legs, you get more muscle." More muscle means better texture.

Fast growing or not, Delahanty follows the French rules, raising the chickens for 12 weeks, which is partly what gives them better flavor and greater size. A six-pound bird makes a magnificent Sunday dinner.

To find out whether there really was a difference in taste, I roasted the regular bird and the Label Rouge bird side by side. Using no herbs, I just rubbed them with salt, put them in a searing hot, castiron skillet then roasted them at 475 degrees, turning three times in all. I carved each bird and served the pieces to three other people who didn't know which was which.

Industrial natural and organic chicken are raised pretty much like other factory-farmed birds.

While carving, I could hardly stop tasting the Red Label bird, it was so good, and the experience was the same for my tasters. Two of them commented on the utter deliciousness of the French bird—it clearly had better flavor than the cross—and it was also firmer fleshed. The third taster, my husband, doesn't much like chicken in the first place. Accordingly, he found the French birds too "chickeny." But then, that's just the point—they really are chickens, and they do have their own, real flavor. They taste like chicken can and should!

Next week at the Santa Fe Farmers Market I asked other people if they had tried Pollo Real's French chickens. Those who had, raved.

"Incredible flavor!" enthused one.

"They were so moist," recalled another.

"Fantastic!" exclaimed a third, while a fourth mentioned that the meat was darker and juicier. Interestingly, these are pretty much the same kinds of comments that have been made about the heritage turkeys Delahanty raises, which are also rustic breeds: they're juicier, have darker meat, firmer texture, more flavor and tend to be more elongated and less ball-like in shape.

With so much enthusiasm from Delahanty and customers for the new birds, I had to ask him what the challengers were for him when it comes to raising them.

"There aren't any, really," he said. "In fact, they're a joy."

The Delahantys will be returning to Italy for Terra Madre this fall with the experience gained since their last visit and a power point presentation to share with whomever is interested in learning from their experiences. The way Delahanty sees it, "We're creating a culture of food, and by sharing our food and what we know, hopefully we can change the direction of industrial organic to food that comes from the heart and soul. In the end, cheap food is cheap. It devalues everything and makes us, as a people, incredibly unrealistic."

The beautiful French chickens aren't cheap, but they have great value. You'll know when you cook one that this is doing chicken right. □

Tom and Tracey Delahanty sell their delicious poultry through their CSA, Pollo Real, at the Santa Fe Farmers Market every Tuesday and Saturday from 7a.m.-noon. Memberships are available year-round, contact: 505 838 0345 polloreal@zianet.com You may also find Pollo Real birds at your local LaMontanita Food Coop, Café Pasqual's, Mu Du Noodles, Aqua Santa, Joe's Diner, Cafe San Estevan, Inn at Loretto, Geronimo, La Posada, Bistro 315, Inn of the Anazasi...(ALBQ) Scalo Northern Italian Cuisine.

THE WORLD'S BEST ROAST CHICKEN

by Kate Manchester

I've been roasting chickens this way for years, and it's a great way to roast Tom's flavorful, juicy Label Rouge birds. This method keeps the bird deliciously moist on the inside, and super crispy outside. You will need a cast iron skillet large enough to hold the chicken. If your chicken is larger than 4 pounds, you may need to increase the cooking time by about 10 minutes per pound.

1. Rinse your bird inside and out, then dry thoroughly with paper towels. This step is key, the bird must go into the pan dry. Season chicken all over, inside and out, with salt (3/4 teaspoon sea salt per pound of chicken), pepper, and any dry seasonings you like to use. Cover and refrigerate.

2. When ready to roast, preheat the oven to 475° for a full 20 minutes. Place a large cast iron skillet on top of the stove, and turn the heat to high—do not add oil. When the skillet is smoking hot, place the whole chicken in the hot skillet, breast side up. The chicken should start to sizzle immediately. Use your oven mitts and place the whole pan in the oven. Within 10 minutes you should hear the pan sizzling in the oven, if not, increase the heat by 25° .

3. After 30 minutes, using a pair of long tongs, turn the bird over (breast side down). If the chicken has blistered, reduce heat by 25° . Cook for 20 minutes,then turn bird back over (breast side up) and roast for another 10 minutes. Total cooking time should be approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Serve immediately!