

FRENCH BLACK TURKEYS

~ IN PARTICULAR THE GERS TURKEY ~

By: Dirk de Jong (NL)

I would like to introduce to you a very old and rare turkey breed, the Gers Turkey. As most people know, there are several countries that have their own turkey type / breed. However, black turkeys are quite rare - although according to the gourmets the blacks are just the finest. England has the black Norfolk and also the Spanish black turkey is known. A large country like France with its many gourmets, has even more; all of them are discussed here. I'll tell about the differences later in this article; first a bit of history.

History

There is quite a lot known about the origin and history of the turkey. It is commonly accepted that they originated in Mexico and that the Aztecs and Mayans domesticated them. The Spanish conqueror Fernando Cortez (1485-1547) is said to have introduced the turkeys in 1520 in Spain, where they were spread further across Europe. This was done so as usual at that time by the nobility and the church. For example, the black turkeys in France have been introduced by the Jesuits, which is why it was nicknamed 'Jesuit' in France.

**Right: Jesuit Père Marquette at the Indians.
Painting by W. Lamprocht.**





Left: Feeding the Turkey. Painting by Eastman Johnson, around 1872-1880.
Photo: www.the-athenaeum.org/

Now I find history especially nice when there is a story attached, making it also easy to pass on. So, on arriving in Mexico, the Spaniards thought they were in India, and there would be many valuable stock to find. (India had already been discovered by other countries, but they kept it a secret to have the exclusive rights as long as possible.) That is why the Spaniards called the natives of Mexico Indians; a name they have always kept.

The big bird we now call turkey, they named 'Indian chicken' - in French *poule d'Inde*. The name for a female turkey hen remained *dinde* in France; the name of the male turkey and the generic *Dindon* is derived from that.

Presumably the first turkeys introduced in Spain were black. The reason: Black turkeys were already rare in Mexico and thus were picked to ship to Spain.



The turkey and Thanksgiving

Many people know that on Thanksgiving Day, a national holiday, currently celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November in the United States, the most common main dish is traditionally turkey. The origin of this tradition is said to be that the first settlers after the failure of their first harvests stayed alive by eating the numerous turkeys that were easy prey. Today, people mostly eat this Thanksgiving turkey stuffed with a bread-based mixture and the roasted turkey is served with cranberry jelly. (Painting by Jennie Augusta Brownscombe)

Culinary

From a dietary point of view, the meat of a turkey is of high quality and low in calories. Rich in protein (breast 24 percent, thighs 21 percent) with essential amino acids and low in fat (breast 2 percent, thighs 8 percent). In addition turkey is rich in valuable polyunsaturated fatty acids and also contains iron; 1 mg per 100 grams. That should be really healthy food!

A large bird like a turkey has different qualities and you should not roast it as a whole. Those old French grannies knew it; the breasts are white meat, lean and tender. The thighs are red meat and more solid; neck, shoulders and the rest is fatter but oh so tasty, great for soup or pate. Today turkeys are bred that are much smaller and with less pronounced meat, a true pity for the gourmet. Fortunately, there are people who are trying to preserve those old heavy breeds. The future of our hobby may thus lie in the collaboration of breeders and lovers of a tasty meat. Or, back to the very beginning of our hobby: animals kept for their utility.

Tip for the hobby cook

As you have read the turkey comes from Mexico. As it happens, also chocolate comes from the same country. Turkey prepared with chocolate is a national dish in Mexico. They call this 'Mole poblano de guajolote'. (Mole poblano contains about 20 ingredients, including chili peppers and chocolate, which works to counteract the heat of the chili peppers, but the chocolate does not dominate.) The combination of meat and chocolate is very special. A creative mind must be able to create a tasty and special dish with these ingredients!



THE BLACK FRENCH TURKEY BREEDS

In France, they distinguish the following black turkey breeds: Bourbonnais, Bresse, Gers, Normandy and Sologne. These varieties are the result of the selection and the preferences of the farmers in those regions. We have to mention that the black Bresse and Normandy turkey are not officially recognized in France as a breed. Here in the Netherlands, only the Sologne turkey and Gers turkey are recognized. However, the differences with other French breeds are so small that they are easy to breed by selection according to the standard.

The Sologne turkey

A heavy and tight feathered variety, deep black with some bronze / brown reflections on the saddle. A strong and hardy breed, the hens are very reliable sitters and broodies. The male weighs up to 12 kg, the female around 7 kg. In earlier years, large groups of Sologne turkeys, guarded by children, could be seen on the fields around Bourges, and 'fielding' for a good proportion of their food. This free-ranging will certainly have had a positive influence on the taste of the meat. The Sologne turkey owes its popularity to the quality of the meat. It is the most original turkey breed in France and the base of the other local varieties.

Right: Advertising picture of Van Houten Cocoa. Caption: In Sologne - Herding of the turkeys.



The Bourbonnais turkey

A bit more slender and elegant than the Sologne, less heavy, fast growing and very hardy. Also the Bourbonnais may show a few brown feathers at the back.

Video

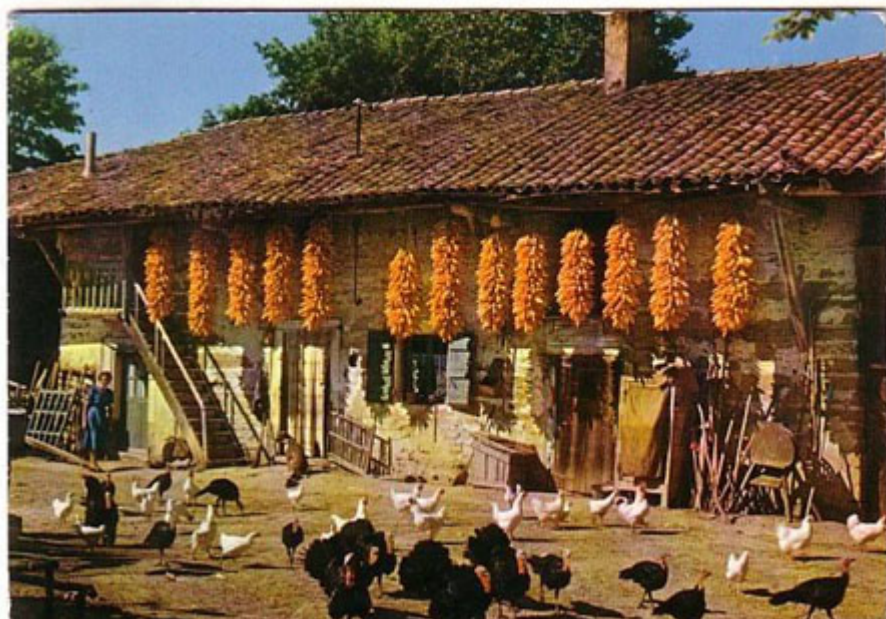
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY3NZD4F2us>



The Bresse and Normandy turkey

There is no official standard of these breeds. They deviate from the Sologne turkey by a slightly lower weight and a somewhat different type, with shorter thighs and thicker legs. The Normandy turkey is said to very well withstand a humid climate.

Right: Bresse chickens and turkeys. The Bresse turkey is smaller than the other French turkey breeds.



The Bresse turkey excels - like the Bresse chicken breed – in very tasty meat, how could it be otherwise, the spicy meadow and typical soil would be the reason. The many differences that occur in people of a large country like France and their love for their own region are the reason for all these regional breeds.



Why did the black turkey become so popular in France? Off course, for its tasty meat; turkeys were for dinner. There was a nice extra: on a white skin you can see the black feather stubbles better than white stubbles. You know, in those days spectacles were not common.

Photo: Knox Gardner.
www.knoxgardner.com

The Gers turkey

This is the heaviest of the French turkeys, with males of 13 kg and females of 8 kg, which is quite something! A nice deep black plumage with some beautiful bronze, brown and green tones on the back, and very heavy legs. The most beautiful and special about the Gers is the headline. The dewlap is a beautiful red and extra long, the face of the tom in excitement is sky blue. Even more beautiful and more special are the many head wattles on the back and upper neck, which are a milky pink colour. It seems like they have an old fashioned curly wig.

The hens are very reliable broodies, which are very solid brooding and guide their poults until they have matured. They also willingly take care for poults of other hens, also if they are already several months old; the caring is apparently in the blood.

I like to introduce this rare and special turkey a bit more extensively to you because this is surely the most spectacular one. The Gers turkey is seriously threatened with extinction. In France, each department has its own preference, as you may have read earlier. The responsibility of maintaining this turkey breed lies with a small group of hobby breeders in the Gers, located in the Pyrenees. We hope breeders in other European countries could lend a hand?





Left: A displaying Gers turkey tom; note the nice bronze tones in the feathering.

Breeding

Whoever wants to breed these turkeys should realize that it is not as easy as with the lighter varieties. This wisdom I have not myself, but from the Gers Turkey specialist Mart Vroom van Vroomhoven (NL) who has been keeping and breeding these turkeys for years.

Here are some experiences and tips by Mart.

1. Mart does not do natural breeding; the Gers hen will sit so tight on the eggs that she is a very easy prey for foxes, martens, raptors, etc.
2. Because of their heavy weight fertilization is not always good. It is better not to breed with pullets; leave them to grow another year. They can be used as a broody to hatch eggs of other hens.
3. Never use an older tom with young hens, this heavy-weight bird will probably kick them to death during the mating ritual. Better use a young tom with old hens. A tom can easily serve several hens, 3 or 4 is quite normal.

Below: three Gers turkey hens.





Rearing

Once the poults are hatched, the rearing will cause only few to no problems, though you should always be careful with poults and moisture, also when they are still under the broody. A Gers turkey grows slow but steady. A good starter food for chicks, enriched with eggs, buttermilk and mealworms is just perfect.

Left: Natural brooding; hen with one of her poults.



Below: Gers turkey poults are not black all over.



Above: My granddaughter Phoebe with Gers poults from the incubator.

Right: Natural brooding; Gers turkey hen with one of her poults.

There is one thing, however, that should not be missing besides the starter food, namely nettles. From day one nettle seeds and chopped green nettle tops can be supplied.





This is not only high-quality green feed with very good vitamins and minerals, but the always present insects on it are a very high-quality animal protein. Additionally nettle contains a natural antibiotic against the dreaded blackhead disease to which turkeys are very sensitive. Green food is always important in the rearing period of poultry; finely cut grass should never be missing. When the poults get older, they will eat a quite varied diet: fruit, bread, all kinds of grain, chicken pellets and they very much like live food, not just insects but also mice and even young rats are seen as a not to miss treat.

Left: Nettle with insects.

Keeping

Gers turkeys are hardy, very resistant to our weather conditions; sleeping outside is no problem. Because of their tight-fitting, thick plumage, rain, wind and even snow have no effect on the Gers Turkey. After a night of rain, a healthy Gers turkey flies apparently bone dry from the tree where he was roosting overnight. Despite their heavy weight turkeys can fly better than chickens and - it will surprise a lot of people - even swimming a few meters is no problem. With some clever perseverance you will manage to have the turkeys sleeping in a coop, although they will prefer the outdoors.

Just one more advice by Mart van Vroomhoven:

Do not trim the wings of a Gers turkey to prevent flying. With their jumping power, they can still get up high in a tree or on a perch. However, when they jump down and cannot slow themselves down by spreading their wings, they might break their legs or breastbone.

Last tip: adult Gers Turkeys should not be fed too much and get too heavy; they have such a big appetite that you might feed them to death.

**Right:
Gers turkey, tom.**



Right: This is Lopke van Vliet and she is not afraid of the turkey tom. She often visits the Gers turkeys here in the Children's Zoo. Once accustomed to their caretakers, Gers turkeys can be quite confiding and tame.

To end with

I hope I have sparked the interest of some people in this old and rare turkey breed. They are not easy to find, but if possible, the people of French Fowl Club will try to help you. You can contact me, being the Secretary of the French Club Fowl, via e-mail



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Below: The tom could walk at will around the brooding hen, later he also walked with the hen and her poults, but he didn't give them much attention, not searching food and was not even really protecting them.



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