

VIVE LA FRANCE

By Luuk Hans

Photo left: Wikipedia Commons



The national symbol of France is a rooster. From the very roots of French history, the Latin word Gallus means both "rooster" and "inhabitant of Gaul". The French rooster emblem adorned the French flag during the French revolution around 1800. The rooster is the emblem of French sports teams in international events, such as the French national soccer team and the French rugby team. The French rooster is even used as part of the logo for some large French brands.

France is also famous for its kitchen. So the combination of these two aspects must give excellent recipes for chicken meat. It sure does, but we first need the birds, before talking about chicken meat. In this respect, too, France has a reputation at stake.

At present there are more than 60 French poultry breeds in large and bantam varieties; some are well known breeds, others are totally unknown. That is more

than in most other countries. Let me get you acquainted with some French breeds.

Development of French breeds

The variety of the French breeds is impressive. The reason for this: France has many departments which used to behave very independently and created their own poultry breed(s). France has a long coastal line as well, which has led for centuries to vivid trade, among which poultry. Moreover, Paris, the capital of France, used to have various market places with strong demand for poultry meat. The local chauvinism and the near-idolization of their own products led to a diverse choice. Chickens were fed with whatever was abundant in that particular region. In one region that used to be corn, in another region wheat, in another slaughter offal. Climate, differences in feeding and regional preferences of the people have created many French poultry breeds.

The improvement of poultry breeds and the description of breeds started around 1850. By then large Asiatic breeds like Cochin, Brahma, Malay and Langshan had been imported and started to influence the French breeds.

International contact also led to import of the French breeds by other countries, where they were 'improved'. Especially German and English breeders took French breeds home. For instance, there is a German type of Faverolles, a genuine French breed. Also the Marans were taken to England. Something went wrong; the breed-specific colour black copper was not taken to England. Also the typical very dark brown egg colour is hardly seen at English egg exhibitions. Various breeds were improved as show birds in Germany and England, like Crève-Coeur, Houdan, La Flèche and Faverolles. Even more so, as France was not so much interested in show birds. However, one should not forget that the first priority in

France, as far as poultry breeding is concerned, is that it must be a good table bird. Or using a quote; Brillat Savarin, the 19th-century French gastronomic writer said: "The fowl is to the kitchen what the canvas is to painters".

Right: An old drawing by A.F. Lydon, picturing a pair of Houdans, a La Flèche cockerel and a Crève-Coeur pullet.



Well-known French breeds

France has given birth to some well-known breeds.

Most French breeds are named after the village or town where they were created. This applies to the Houdan, Crève-Coeur and La Flèche, which all belong to the oldest crested breeds of France.

Crested breeds

The **Houdan** is probably one of the best known and most popular French breeds. It seems that it has existed for centuries in its department Seine-et-Oise, taking its name after a little town of Houdan. Evidently – for a French breed – the Houdan is known originally for its flesh. It has been perfected as a show bird by

English breeders. The Houdan has a striking appearance with its large crest and beard, leaf-comb and fifth toe. It is difficult to say how it was originally created but most likely the Polish played a role, as did common five-toed fowl. Maybe the Dorking played a role here, but that is questionable. It was a popular bird in the 19th century, but now a rare appearance. Unfortunately the same applies for the bantam variety, which was created in England just after World War II.

The mottled Houdan is most common. The white Houdan originated in the USA; the result of crossing White Polish and Mottled Houdans. In European countries the Houdan is also recognized in Blue and Cuckoo.



Left: Houdan cockerel.
Photo: Dirk de Jong.

The **Crève-Coeur**, indeed named after the town Crève-Coeur, has much in common with the Houdan, but it is even more a table bird. The Crève-Coeur used to be popular in the 19th century in France, too. The Crève-Coeur is a bearded bird which normally has four toes and a V shaped comb in front of a full crest. They are most common in Black, although they exist in Blue, Cuckoo and White in other countries. The Germans have recently created a bantam variety, around 1995. Both large and bantam are very rare.



Right: White Crève-coeurs and mottled Houdans.

Below: La Flèche in Cuckoo, White and Black.

Photos: Dirk de Jong.



La Flèche, from the village of La Flèche in the Valley of Sarthe, used to be a table bird also. It is one of the oldest breeds, which exist in the pictures of the 16th century. Nowadays it is only kept by fanciers. The La Flèche is indeed a striking old show bird with its devilish appearance, with a horned comb and two spikes in front. Mostly in black, but also in white, blue and cuckoo. In the USA



only the black La Flèche is recognized. Its origin is thought to be a cross between the Spanish fowl, with large white earlobes, and the Polish or Crève-Coeur. English and German breeders have shaped the plump table bird into an elegant breed, with high carriage and good egg laying capabilities. There are also bantams, recognized in Germany in 1970.



Above and right: Head study of a La Flèche cockerel.
Photos: Dirk de Jong.

Ordinary breeds

The crested birds mentioned above do not seem, by their ornaments and appearance, as the most logical meat producing fowl. But the French have introduced some genuine table birds too.

Think of the Faverolles, Bresse and Marans, just to name a few popular breeds.



Left: A Faverolles cockerel.
Photo: Dirk de Jong.

The **Faverolles** is a composite breed; the result of indiscriminate crossing. Ancestors might be the Dorking (fifth toe), the Cochin (the feathered legs), the Houdan (whiskers and beard) and the Langshan. Nevertheless, a notable bird since late 19th century, with nice salmon colour. Once again, a breed named after a village called Faverolles in the department of Eure-et-Loir. A large, broad and deep breed, and a hardy bird. And, of course, a superior quality of flesh.

The Germans have created their own Faverolles; 'German salmon fowl'. Again, it happened quite often, during mid 19th century, that English and German breeders perfected French breeds for show reason, while at the same time the French breeders were being more preoccupied by the birds' economic qualities. It is English breeders' art that perfected the salmon colour. Next to Salmon, the Faverolles are also found in white and white Columbia varieties.

Right: A few years ago the Dutch Breeders' Club of French Poultry breeds donated these Faverolles to the Mayor and residents of the village Faverolles in France.
Photo: Dirk de Jong.



Left: Marans.
Photo: Dirk de Jong.

Another breed which soon got the interest of English breeders is the **Marans**. A relatively young breed, being created around the turn into the 20th century, in the city of Marans (of course).

The Marans, a breed with a bit of leg-feathering, is not yet recognized in the American Standard of Perfection, although I have seen them in the USA. The Marans are famous for their impressive dark brown eggs, although they also make excellent table birds. How the breed was created remains unknown, but possibly Croad Langshan and Faverolles were at its origins. The first imports to England were cuckoo birds, and not the breed's own black-copper colour. As a consequence, the English birds



lost the impressive brown egg colour. The bantam variety was created in the first half of the 20st century in England. Next to black-copper, Marans are also found in silver cuckoo and gold cuckoo, among others.



The breeds which are seen in the countries on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea have much in common. This is also true for the **Bresse-Gauloise** fowl and Spanish and Italian breeds like Minorca and Leghorn. Whilst the Bresse is medium in size (cock approx. 2.5 kg), it fattens remarkably and increases greatly in flesh. Nowadays it ranks first among table poultry. The name Bresse stands for excellent poultry meat! As national poultry glory it shows the French national flag; blue legs, white body and a red comb (although it is also known in black, grey and blue varieties). It has a so-called "Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée" - the only poultry breed which has this quality mark since 1957! This quality mark has recently been given to the Houdan too.

Left: A Bresse capon at Raymond Aldolphy's in France. Photo: Ad Taks.

Outside the specific Bresse zone, which is defined and protected by legal provisions, these chickens are referred to as **Gauloise**. Reputed for its flesh, the

Bresse is known as "the Fowl of Kings" because it used to be offered to kings and to newly-elected presidents of the French Republic. The Bresse is fed, at least during the two last weeks, by milk soaked corn.

Game Fowl

Northern France is also famous for its game fowl. Cock-fighting has been popular in northern France, where it is still allowed (actually, the only place in France and Europe). These fights are very popular and involve betting, which can sometimes attain very high stakes. The comb and wattles of the cock are cut for the fighting. The Game Fowl breeds of (northern) France and its northern neighbour, Belgium, have much in common. France has one game bird, the **Combattant du Nord** ('northern fighter'). Contrary to its neighbours', it has yellow legs. This breed originates from the departments of the North and Pas-de-Calais. The main purpose, apart from fighting, is its value as table bird, with a great amount of flesh, chiefly on the breast. It has much in common with the Belgian (Bruges and Lieges) Game heavy weight fighters (around 5 kg. for the cock). Then we speak of 'Grand Combattant du Nord'. There are actually four classes of weight; its average weight is 4.5 kg. Its lighter version is called 'Petit Combattant du Nord' and weighs roughly 3.5 kg. There is also a bantam version.

Unknown French breeds

Like I said, France has many local poultry breeds, probably more than any other country. Even so, France has many regional, local breeds which are unknown to most of us. As an example, some years ago I was in France, near Tours, and I

discovered a poultry book on the bookshelf of my hotel. It was a 96 page book on the breed 'Geline du Touraine'. A black table fowl, which I had never heard of before, but due to this book, now a familiar breed! Obviously, the book ends with some delicious recipes.

Right: A Noir de Challans hen - a chicken breed from the region Vendée, which is only recognised in the black variety. Photo: Vincent Durancaeu, FRAV.



Finally, let me introduce some unknown French breeds to you.

The French seem to have a preference for black poultry. Like the **Noir de Berry** (Blacks from the village of Berry), but also breeds like

Caumont, Cotentine, Gasconne, Landaise, and Celine du Touraine. The Caumont, with its buttercup comb, is an old breed, named after a small village in Normandy. Normandy is well known as birthplace for other breeds, like the Cotentine which descends from a peninsula near Cherbourg. Before WW II the Gasconne was well known for its egg laying capabilities. This breed is only recognized in black. Also the **Alsacienne** exist since long in the l'Alsace, and was created when l'Alsace was part of Germany. Mainly in black, but also present in other colours; partridge, blue and white (with a bantam variety as well).

The **Gauloise Doré**, a partridge fowl with single comb (cock 2.5 kg.) is the French national symbol. It is one of the oldest French breeds.

Left: Gournay. Photo: Aviculture Europe.



The region of Forez (Loire) is the birthplace of the white **Cou-nu de Forez.** The Cou-Nu Fowls are naked neck chickens and are reputed for being hardy. Their neck is completely

naked with the exception of a tuft of feathers in the middle, set apart from the rest. (Cock: 3 to 3.5 kg.)

This way we can go on and on. **La Lyonnaise** is a frizzled breed. More breeds are **Nantes, Bourbourg, Charollaise, Estaire, Coucou de France**, (French Cuckoo), **Gournay, Meusienne** and **Merlerault**. Just to name a few more.

Finally we close this summary with the short legged **Courtes-pattes**. In shape this breed resembles the German short legged fowl, more than the Scottish short legged fowl. Not surprisingly, since the German variety played a vital role in the recreation of this French short legged table bird. Black is the most popular colour. German breeders created a bantam variety.

Right: Cou-Nu du Forez. Photo: Dirk de Jong



Summary

We have given you an overview of French breeds. Most are not known in America or actually even outside France. In all those years, breeders from other countries, especially England and Germany, have been able to pick the most interesting and valuable breeds. That is, from a showing perspective. The French can't be beaten if it is about table qualities of the poultry breeds.

So, try the French perspective also! Bon appetite!

Thanks to Dirk de Jong, Dutch French Poultry Club.

Suggested reading: 'Coqs et Poules, les races françaises' by Jean Claude Périquet.

