

In the kitchen



This month **Paola Westbeek** explains why Bresse chicken is the poultry of kings...

About two weeks before Christmas, when our thoughts turn to last-minute preparations for the most important feast of the year, four towns in eastern France hold a much-anticipated beauty pageant. Not the kind with silly questions, swimsuits and sashes, but an exhibition of gourmet splendour in honour of the country's most renowned poultry, the rustically elegant *Volaille de Bresse*.

Referred to as '*la reine des volailles et volaille des rois*' (the queen of poultry and the poultry of kings) by Brillat-Savarin in his influential culinary masterpiece *Physiologie du goût* (1825), this noble breed has been prized for its beautifully marbled, ivory flesh since at least the 16th century. It was officially noted in Bourg-en-Bresse's town records on 12 November 1591, when citizens gifted the Marquise of Treffort two dozen 'fat poultry' as a token of appreciation for defending them against the troops of Savoie. Granted AOC (*Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*) certification in 1957, the *Gauloise de Bresse* proudly wears the national colours (a bright red comb, snow-white feathers and sturdy blue claws).

The four-day Les Glorieuses de Bresse festival, first organised in 1862, takes place in Louhans, Bourg-en-Bresse, Pont-de-Vaux and Montrevel-de-Bresse, and brings together the region's skilled *éleveurs*, eager to show off their handsome birds to famed chefs, journalists and gastronomes from all over the world. On display are turkeys,



© ALAIN BORE BOURG-EN-BRESSE FRANCE COMTE TOURNAI

chickens of at least 1.3 kilos and their two larger cousins popular at Christmas (the *poularde* weighing in at approximately 1.8kg and the *capon* tipping the scales at a hefty 3kg).

Each plump bird is carefully wrapped in a cotton, linen or hemp 'corset' and tightly laced up to ensure an even distribution of fat and to keep the delicate meat from spoiling. There are plenty of opportunities to taste Bresse poultry during the festival, and local restaurants serve special menus with it.

Bresse poultry is a slow-growing breed that enjoys plenty of space, fresh air and a diet of tasty insects, grass, worms, local grains and creamy milk. In the pan, just as in life, they must be thoroughly pampered. Roast the birds slowly and baste them every 15 minutes or try *poulet de Bresse à la crème*, a Georges Blanc recipe. Simply cut the chicken into eight pieces, fry in plenty of butter, add onions and garlic, deglaze with white wine and finish with a drizzle of cream and a handful of morel mushrooms.

If you don't live in France, a simple Google search (or a chat with your butcher) is all you need to get your hands on one of these fine birds, just in time for Christmas lunch.

serve with...

A buttery, well-structured Meursault Premier Cru blanc with oaky notes and a vibrant acidity will complement the richness of *poulet à la crème*.

