



FEATURE

Setting The Standards

The American Poultry Association Is Now Certifying "Standard" Chickens Like They Did 50 Years Ago

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CALIFORNIA

With increased interest in heritage breeds in poultry, the American Poultry Association is stepping up to promote standard breeds with its new Flock Inspection Program that will certify consumer chickens with the APA's imprimatur.

"We have come to grips with how we will inspect for market quality and how the flock matches the Standard," said Dave Anderson, APA president.

Not every chicken with a "Standard" classification will make a good, productive member of the flock. Hatchery stock may have unacceptable defects. Birds bred for exhibition may have lost their productivity. Chickens are more than pretty feathers.

"They need to have good muscle development, fertility and egg production," said Frank Reese, owner of Good

Shepherd Poultry Ranch in Kansas. "This program should help people improve quality and production of these birds."

In the past, the APA inspected flocks, but abandoned that responsibility 50 years ago. Commercial poultry farms overwhelmed smaller Standard breed flocks after World War II. The chicken meat business turned to genetically similar industrially developed chickens, which are unable to mate and reproduce naturally. They grow to market size in six to seven weeks. If allowed to grow to maturity, they are hardly able even to walk. Their underdeveloped immune systems can't protect them against even ordinary diseases.

Modern hybrids with flashy names such as Freedom Ranger and Golden Nugget have been developed to take advantage of the market for chickens that

The American Poultry Association will be inspecting flocks and verifying “Standard” traits in heritage breeds.



breeds in hundreds of varieties. The first Standard was published in 1874. Dates are given for every recognized breed.

That original Standard was written to improve the quality, uniformity and marketability of poultry flocks. Over the years, its emphasis changed to focus on poultry exhibitions. Utility became an afterthought, although the Standard still lists Economic Qualities in its breed descriptions.

“Standard” is the operant word, meaning breeds that have been documented and officially recognized. Heritage, historic, traditional, antique, heirloom and other

words are descriptive, but their meanings vary slightly and can be stretched and distorted to cover anything. “Standard” is a word with a defined meaning: If the breed wasn’t in the Standard before 1950, it can’t get the certification.

APA qualified judges will inspect flocks for their adherence to the APA written Standard.

“The birds must have the general conformation of their breed,” said Mr. Anderson. “The flock cannot have more than two percent significant disqualifications such as roach back. The flock has to have less than 15 percent minor variations from the Standard, such as the wrong eye color or side sprigs on the comb. Of course, the entire flock has to be healthy.”

Judge-inspectors can offer advice to help the producer improve his flock. They can help the farmer pick out the best birds for breeding. Their knowledge, and that of the Standard breed producers they inspect, will help USDA inspectors learn how to grade Standard-bred birds.

“They are not just coming to judge your birds,” said Mr. Reese. “They are coming to help you. It should be a learning experience.”

Mr. Reese is the leading Standard breed poultry producer in the country. He supplies Emmer & Co. with up to

2,000 chickens every three weeks and Heritage Foods USA with 500 every three weeks. He raises Barred Rock and New Hampshire chickens, Bronze and Narragansett turkeys, and other poultry.

Mr. Reese, in cooperation with the

Livestock Conservancy and others, has developed a Heritage Breed definition that relies on the APA Standard. His label has been approved by the USDA and goes on each bird packaged and sold. So far, he is the only producer whose label has USDA approval.

“The APA will offer a stamp like the USDA to help consumers make

their choices,” Mr. Anderson said.

Certification assures the purchaser that the product they are buying meets certain standards. The USDA’s Certified Organic label is the best known. Certifications increase product value. The Certified Organic label has been so successful in increasing the return to producers that major retailers claim it, not always honestly. Fraud and lack of clarity as to standards have resulted in some erosion of its value, but it remains a significant contributor to farm income and consumer trust. Labels are so important to consumers and influential on the prices they are willing to pay that in some areas, such as fish, fraudulently mislabeling is common.

Emmer & Co. can’t keep up with the demand. Reese is raising as many birds as he can for them and works with other producers to increase the supply.

“These are true, authentic Standard bred chickens,” Reese said. “If you will breed them to meet the standards, you will have a marketable animal.”

Christine Heinrichs is the author of How to Raise Chickens and How to Raise Poultry, published by Voyageur Press. Both focus on raising traditional breed poultry in small flocks. Find her books in our bookstore on page 36.

ABBREVIATED DEFINITION

A Heritage Egg can only be produced by an American Poultry Association Standard breed. A Heritage Chicken is hatched from a heritage egg sired by an American Poultry Association Standard breed established prior to the mid-20th century, is slow growing, and naturally mated for a long, productive life.

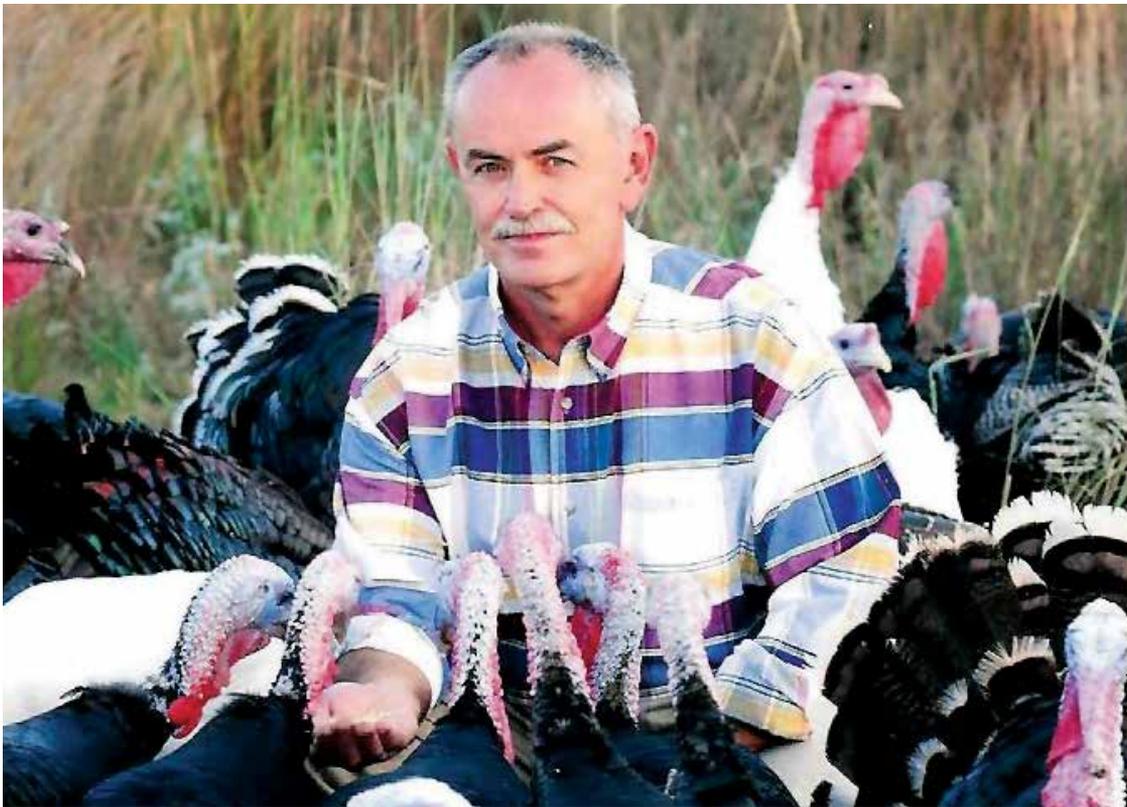
are raised in better conditions. They may be raised on pasture and fed an organic diet, but their genetics doom them. They may have unseen internal abnormalities such as cardiac and skeletal problems.

“Chickens have several serious welfare problems that come from bad genetics and can be fixed only with good genetics,” animal welfare advisor Temple Grandin wrote in her book, *Animals Make Us Human*.

Standard breeds have recognizable identity and documented history. Reviving the inspection program in the 21st century will help standard breed producers justify the higher prices their products deserve.

The APA Standard of Perfection lists all the breeds that have been described and officially recognized for exhibition at poultry shows. That’s about 50 different

Defining Heritage Breeds



Frank Reese of Good Shepherd Poultry Ranch in Kansas, in cooperation with the Livestock Conservancy and others, has developed a Heritage Breed definition. It's specific to chickens, but is appropriate for all poultry products. His goal is to clarify the meaning for consumers. Other breed conservation and humane organizations have approved it. Here are the four qualifications they have set to merit a heritage label:

1. APA STANDARD BREED

Heritage chickens must be from parent and grandparent stock of breeds recognized by the American Poultry Association prior to the mid-20th century; whose genetic line can be traced back multiple generations; and with traits that meet the APA Standard of Perfection guidelines for the breed. Heritage eggs must be laid by an APA Standard breed.

2. NATURALLY MATING

Heritage Chickens must be reproduced and genetically maintained through natural mating. Chickens marketed as “heritage” must be the result of naturally mating pairs of both grandparent and parent stock.

3. LONG PRODUCTIVE OUTDOOR LIFESPAN

Heritage Chickens must have the genetic ability to live a long, vigorous

life and thrive in the rigors of pasture-based, outdoor production systems. Breeding hens should be productive for five to seven years and roosters for three to five years.

4. SLOW GROWTH RATE

Heritage Chickens must have a moderate to slow rate of growth, reaching appropriate market weight for the breed in no less than 14 weeks. This gives the chicken time to develop strong skeletal structure and healthy organs prior to building muscle mass.

Chickens marketed as “heritage” must include the variety and breed name on the label.

Terms like “heirloom,” “antique,” “old-fashioned,” and “old timey” (I would add “traditional” and “historic”) imply “heritage” and are understood to be synonymous with this definition.

