

HISTORY OF THE CHICKEN

All chickens originate from Southeast Asia, the home of the well-known wild red jungle fowl of India (*Gallus Gallus*), whose descendants have been bred to form all the different varieties and breeds that have existed over the centuries. All wild fowls, like their domesticated descendants, spend the greater part of their time searching for food and basking in the sun to become stronger, and taking dust baths to clean their feathers. Chickens prefer finding a raised place to sleep and the hens sleep close to and surrounding the cocks for greater protection. They generally live in small groups consisting of a dominant cock, one or more hens and the young chicks. Research has shown that they are capable of distinguishing between 80 or more members of their species and can locate them by call in the midst of the dense foliage of the jungle.

The oldest bones of domestic chickens have been found in the southern part of China and have been dated at about 6,000 BC. Chickens are known to have been domesticated in China and Southeast Asia as early as 3,400 BC. These animals were descendants of wild fowl that lived in the jungle of Burma and northern Thailand and were first domesticated in the province of Chan. From here they spread towards India, and reached Northern Europe during the Neolithic period, around 3000 BC. It is believed that the Greek introduced these animals to the Mediterranean area.

Even though raising poultry is a very ancient art, bird breeding, as a technique, was not widespread until the middle of the 19th century, coinciding with the introduction of exotic breeds from abroad. At this time, importance was first placed on the concept of breed and many were created and recorded, especially in England and France.

In Catalonia, the origins of modern poultry breeding can be traced to the foundation of the Poultry Breeding School of Arenys de Mar by Salvador Castelló Carreras in 1896. These techniques were revived in the 20's with the creation of numerous poultry breeding farms, especially in the area around Reus.

The work of Salvador Castelló was very important throughout the region of Baix Llobregat, especially in Prat, where he became highly interested in the local breed of bird which had considerable fame in the markets of Barcelona and which had specific characteristics that had been perpetuated throughout the centuries. "These special characteristics were an evident indication that this was a racial group within a native population, and this was the great discovery of professor Castelló". He made a decisive contribution to making these chickens more well-known through the organisation of poultry exhibitions. Castelló's work in promoting the Catalan variety of Prat chickens made them popular throughout Spain and Central and South America, and they gained special acceptance on the island of Cuba and the Plata region of Argentina.

Modern chicken breeding mainly concentrates on the development of hybrids, the result of careful selection and combination of the best traits of native breeds in order to obtain more efficient production. Apart from genetic selection, improvements have also taken place in the hygienic conditions for breeding, ranging from the generalised use of artificial incubators to the massive use of prepared feeds.

The increase in the popularisation of broilers, young chickens that grow quickly and can be consumed 40 days after their birth.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VARIETY

The Catalan variety of Prat chicken refers to hens and cocks that present very specific common characteristics and which were frequently bred in the region of Bait Llobregat, especially in the delta area of the river. The abundance and recognised quality of birds bred in Prat meant that the name of the breed and that of the city had been associated since time immemorial. In 1987 the Generalitat (Local Government) of Catalonia declared that the production region for than generic denomination of quality for Prat chicken and capon included, in addition to Prat de Llobregat, the municipalities of Castelldefels, Cornellà de Llobregat, Gavà, Sant Boi de Llobregat, Sant Climent de Llobregat, Sant Feliu de Llobregat, Viladecans and Santa Coloma de Cervelló.

Hens and cocks of Catalanian variety of Prat chicken must present certain common characteristics that comply with the established pattern. It is, above all, the characteristic colouring of this bird that makes it so easy to identify. Its most outstanding external characteristic is its feathers, a vivid dark pink without becoming reddish, the colour is slightly darker in the cock, especially the feathers of the neck and back which are shiny, as if varnished, and in the hen of a even dark pink. The tail feathers of the cock are greenish black in colour, with a very black metallic highlights in the hen.

Another outstanding characteristic is the slate blue colouring the legs and claws which gives rise to the commonly used nickname given to these birds: blue legs. In addition to the feathers and legs, another characteristic is the vivid red of the crest, the face, and the wattle; the whiteness of the ears; reddish hazelnut eyes; and dark beak.

Cocks and hens have common characteristics and some slight differences in the profile.

THE COCK

Head: relatively large, wide, and long.

Face: smooth without any granulation.

Beak: long, strong vigorous, and well curved.

Eyes: large, round, and prominent.

Crest: simple, large, well toothed, with five or six points, wide and well arched, the first and last teeth are slightly smaller than those in the middle, smooth and with the rear part following the line of the neck.

Wattle: large, hanging, rounded and finely textured.

Ears: wide, oval smooth without any folds or wrinkles.

Neck: robust and well arched.

Wings: large, held close to the body.

Back: wide and flat, with a slight inclination towards the tail.

Chest: wide and deep.

Tail: abundant, large, sickle shaped towards the rear forming an angle of 40 to 45°C on the line of the back.

Thighs: long and meaty, with the knees well separated.

Legs: quite long and free of all feathers.

Claws: four, well separated, straight and strong

THE HEN

Head, face and eyes: the same as the cock.

Beak: shorten than that of the cock and not curved.

Crest: well toothed, leaning to one side, without covering the eye nor forming folds or wrinkles.

Wattle: longer than those of the cock and almost round.

Ears: smaller than the cock.

Neck: shorter than the cock and straight.

Wings: held close to the body.

Back: large, wide, flat and slightly inclined toward the tail.

Tail: long, well feathered, and not very high.

Thighs, legs, and claws: the same as the cock but slightly smaller.

The accepted standards for weight are:

Adult cock: 2.800 Kg. **Young cock:** 2.400 Kg

Adult hen: 2.100 Kg. **Young hen:** 1.800 Kg.

PRAT VARIETIES

The Tawny is the most popular and best known hen of the Prat variety. There is, however, another well-known variety from Prat whose feathers are white in colour. The origin of this variety goes back to crossbreeding with white hens from the Vallès region. This crossbreeding took place with the participation of Salvador Castelló. Later, Castelló would improve this variety by further crossbreeding with the French Bresse variety. The cock and the hen of this variety are only distinguished from the Tawny by having completely white feathers.

Enric Corominas mentions a black variety obtained from the white variety in 1931. This strain evolved in farms of the Vallès region where 1% of the chicks were born black. Their existence as a variation of the Prat chicken is questioned by some experts like Fernando Orozco, who bases his opinion on the fact that, genetically, this possibility is highly improbable. This possible variety must have disappeared as a result of the difficulties brought about by the civil war. Finally, Fernando Orozco also mentions a brownish variety, but goes on this idea, "My personal opinion is that an authentic brown variety never existed as such. I make this statement, although it is based on no more than the following argument: if the Tawny took so long to become pure and establish itself, this same process would be difficult for the brown variety which (...) could have different genetic bases; on the other hand, this will also explain the lack of consistency in the description of this variety in the many references available"¹

¹ Fernando Orozco Piñán: **Spanish Chicken Breeds**. Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing and Food.- Ediciones Mundi-Prensa. Madrid, 1989. Page 10

THE ORIGIN OF THE PRAT VARIETY

The Catalan variety of Prat chicken, as described by Salvador Castelló, was originally a Mediterranean hen with a simple crest, upright in the cock, and fallen in the adult hen, slimly shaped, with clean legs and an imposing tail with long feathers. The differences were in the size, larger in the Prat variety, and in the colouring of the eggs, light coffee colour with a tendency towards red. Santos Arán, a student of Castelló, extended these differential characteristics by adding a tendency towards early maturity in reproduction in exchange for losing some aptitudes regarding laying.

In the opinion of some experts, these differences in the Prat chicken indicate a possible cross with another breed, probably exotic. According to the theories formulated by Professor Castelló, the larger size of the animals, the colouring of the eggs, the tendency towards a tawny colouring, the red ears and the feathers on the legs, -which disappeared over the years- indicate crossbreeding of the Prat with the Cochin chicken, an exotic breed coming from Asia.

Santos Arán explained that, at the end of the last century, the Cochin, the first foreign breed to reach the peninsula, gained rapid acceptance and was easy to find on farms in Barcelona, especially the largest one located in Travessera de Gràcia. Here the sold chicks which were probably distributed throughout the area of Barcelona and its surroundings. It would have been easy to introduce them into the Prat region.

Arán is quite categorical when he affirms: "There is no doubt that a crossbreeding took place; the predominantly tawny colouring, the feathering on the legs of the majority of Prat chickens from 1890 to 1895, the red colouring of the egg and its smaller size compared to the eggs from Villafranca, white, large and predominant in the Llobregat River basin, together with the tendency, unlike the common hen, of Prat chickens to become broody and the persistence even today of red ears are all traits of the Cochin variety and no other".

More recent studies emphasize the work carried out by Fernando Orozco, and agricultural engineer, who established a differentiation between domestic poultry raised by farmers on the river delta and the Prat, the Catalan from Prat, or the Tawny Prat of more recent development. The breed was definitely characterised at the end of the 19th century.

Orozco discusses the controversy created around the theory of the origin of the Prat variety as postulated by Professor Castelló and his disciples. Modern studies have not clarified this matter and have limited themselves to discussing the weak points of the theory by Castelló, without formulating any other alternative hypothesis that could seem more reliable.

Fernando Orozco wrote: "Professor Salvador Castelló suggests the following theory. The Prat variety is the result of crossbreeding the Asian "Cochin" with native birds from the Prat region; this probably took place around 1885. We would like to point out, however, that this cross was not made by farmers looking for a new breed, but merely to improve their chickens (...). Castelló also mentions that when speaking with farmers they recall that some gentlemen from Barcelona brought some foreign breeds of chickens that were very large, lightly coloured and with feather on the legs. It seems that some of these farmers crossed them with their poultry to increase the size or, if this crossbreeding was accidental, they noted and interesting increase in size. They also said that since then the eggs were no longer white".

In opposition to the theories of Castelló, Alberto Brillat claimed that the larger size of Prat poultry could be due to the geological characteristics of delta regions, which always produce larger animals. If it is really because of crossbreeding with the Cochin, the result would be poultry which was larger than the Mediterranean types and smaller than the Asian varieties when in fact, the size and appearance are much closer to Mediterranean breeds of which it also still conserves the crest. The same author also questions the unlikely fact that crossbreeding only took place with one breed and not with any other foreign breeds that were introduced at that time. This seems to indicate a policy of careful selection and improvement which is highly unlikely to have occurred. The problem, as Orozco points out, without offering any other acceptable alternative.

Fernando Orozco is inclined to favour the hypothesis suggested by Castelló, even though he agrees that there are certain weak points in this theory, some coinciding with those of Brillat, who does no more than present further doubts instead of possible solutions. More genetic studies have provided evidence which would not have been known by Castelló in favour of the theory of the existence of a crossed breed: The presence of a gene called Columbia or Columbi (Co) which is not present in Mediterranean breeds but is found in many Asian and Atlantic types.

The opinion of Orozco, the result of modern studies, and the experience of his predecessors, comes closest to what must have been the origin of the Prat variety, an origin which, as we have seen, is not completely understood even today. "The poultry of Catalonia and therefore, that of the Prat region, was without any doubt and for quite some time, of the type known as Mediterranean. Possibly with considerable segregation in the colour of the feathers and the legs in some other characteristics. There were probably many brown specimens, perhaps various types regarding the colour of the hen: dark, brown with a pinkish breast, creamy orange with owl like markings, etc., the cocks always being black-chested, with a golden coat like the ancient cock or the primitive Spanish fighting cock. It is possible that there were black and white specimens, although this does not appear to be a frequent occurrence. There would be, however, a whole range of intermediate colourings because of natural interbreeding. We do not know whether contact with poultry from the Pyrenees could have already incorporated the gene "Co" which eliminates the brown colouring in the hens and the black chest of the cocks, producing whole range of colours from dark brown to light cream, including reddish and golden colourings. The colour of the legs would tend towards black or a slate grey in the brown specimens and perhaps bluish if the animals were golden or cream coloured, and even include light pink or yellow legs; the latter being the most frequent colour if there was contact with poultry from the Atlantic seaboard. None of this can be proved, but it seems logical enough, basing our affirmation on the following facts: what already existed according to written references; the fact that there are still remote areas of Catalonia, only a few, where there are specimens that are probably very similar to the original native bird; and the reasons based on a modern understanding of genetics.

Poultry originating from Prat must have this "Co" gene which we refer to so often even at the risk of not being understood by the reader. This gene could have been introduced either by crossbreeding with poultry which was just as wild, rustic, or native, but from the Atlantic seaboard or by crossbreeding, with or without a specific reason, with a foreign breed, whether it be the Cochin or any other. Logically, as it is known that at the end of the century there were poultry breeders close to Barcelona with this particular variety, makes it more probable that it, and not any other, participated in the formation of the Prat variety"²

Summarising the different opinions of these experts, the Prat region must have, from time immemorial, had a particular type of Mediterranean poultry which was of very high quality, especially for meat and which, at the end of the last century and because of crossbreeding with other species, acquired specific characteristics which would later give rise to what we now know as the Catalan variety of Prat chicken. The most important events influencing this process were the spontaneous selection made by farmers, that participation of poultry breeders, and the basic work of Professor Salvador Castelló. In spite of all this, the origins are still rather confusing and only complete genetic studies combined with a better historical understanding of the way the expansion from Asia took place, will there be a final solution to this problem.

**All the texts are from the book "Pollastre i capó Raça Prat. 25 anys de fira. Identitat. Tradició. Gastronomia"
Ajuntament del Prat de Llobregat**

² Orozco: op.cit. pp 96-97

