

# In Search Of Better Tasting Chicken

Slow chicken is a hot new trend with a growing number of companies jumping on board, but Ariane Daguin has promoted it for nearly 40 years. Daguin founded D'Artagnan in the early 1980's to provide high-quality meat and poultry to New York City chefs. Key to that was finding chicken that tasted like the chicken she had grown up eating in Gascony, France.

Most commercial chickens are on feed for as little as 35 days before slaughter and fed mostly corn, soybean meal, and poultry meal (by-products of poultry production, slaughter, and processing). Daguin found the results tasteless. She began looking for a slower-growing chicken fed a different diet.

"We wanted better and better chicken that was raised free-range and fed local grain and vegetables over a much longer time," says Daguin. "We started a breeding program with Brune Landaise, a dual-purpose breed that would thrive on that diet."

Daguin largely relies on Amish and Mennonite farmers for both her breeding and production programs, as she has from the start. She organized co-ops to provide the feed and laid out standards of care, including

space and diet, and forbidding the use of antibiotics or growth hormones in the free-ranging birds. Unlike commercial chicken feed rations, birds raised for Daguin are fed no animal by-products.

Her slow chicken was the first on the market to be certified by the USDA as free-range chicken. She also maintains a full farm-to-table audit trail.

Today, in addition to the Gallus brun breed that matures in 85 days, her farmers also raise Rock Cornish broilers. They're grown for 54 days or longer. They also thrive on Daguin's ration of locally raised grain and vegetables.

While she started small, Daguin has built a dedicated national customer base. Her reputation for quality meat and poultry has earned her coverage in the top food and business magazines in the U.S. It's also created a steady demand for sources to supply D'Artagnan with slow chicken.

"Today, we sell about 500 of our 85-day plus broilers and about 30,000 of our 54-day broilers each week," says Daguin. "We're constantly looking for new producers, as we don't want to stress a farmer to raise more than they have room for."

As the business has grown, standards of care and diet have stayed constant. The trucks that pick up birds for slaughter, pick up vegetables from suppliers for their return trip, delivering them to the same farms.

Federally inspected slaughterhouses are a major constraint for D'Artagnan, as for others. New farmers must be on a route between existing farms and a slaughterhouse. Daguin has worked with the American Farm Bureau and others to promote more slaughterhouses. She advises anyone considering direct marketing meat and poultry to first secure local slaughterhouse access and scheduling.

"We saw how fragile the livestock industry is when the large slaughterhouses closed during the pandemic," says Daguin. "The solution is a more direct connection between the breeder and the consumer."

In the case of slow chicken, people need to be introduced to and recognize the value of higher-quality chicken. While the bulk of consumers still favor cheap chicken, interest in slow chicken is growing.

"There's a lot of buzz and growth in demand for our 60-day chicken," says Daguin. "It's a good medium-quality bird and



Ariane Daguin and her slow chicken.

not as expensive as our 100-day birds. I sell a few of the 100-day birds on our website, but most go to a list of 10 to 12 top chefs."

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## Fast-Growing Mulberries Gaining Popularity

Mulberries are a fruit with a future, according to Weston Lombard. Lombard is convinced they could play a role in developing a sustainable agroforestry system, something he's been trying to develop on the farm he and his wife own in Vermont.

"When we bought the farm, we had mulberries growing wild," says Lombard.

He planned to use them as part of his terrace gardening, agroforestry, and rotational grazing practices. White mulberries were introduced by the thousands from China in the 1700's in the hopes of developing a silkworm industry. When that failed, they went wild and hybridized with native red mulberry varieties. While they differ in some respects, they share many beneficial aspects.

"Young mulberry leaves can be eaten as fresh greens, as any of the cultivars are edible, although whites tend to be more tender fresh," says Lombard. "They can also be used as a wrap like grape leaves. When they get older and aren't as palatable, they can be dried and used for tea. They're incredibly nutritious."

Trees are fast growing and can grow up

to 65 ft. They're quick to produce and very productive if you can harvest them.

"A newly grafted seedling will make a berry the first year and be quite productive by year five," he says. "If thinned and pruned, in a perfect scenario, you could expect 10 bushels of berries by year 10. However, expect to share with wildlife. You're competing with birds and any mammals that can climb."

Mulberries ripen from early June through August, depending on the cultivar. Some cultivars produce over a 6-week season, while others ripen in a 2-week window.

"If you plant a mix of varieties, you can have a continuous crop throughout the summer," reports Lombard.

He admits that their short shelf life is one mark against them. Once they ripen, they need to be eaten fresh or processed immediately.

"They freeze well. Just pick, wash, and freeze," says Lombard. "Frozen mulberries can be added to cereals, baked goods, or smoothies. Anything you can do with raspberries, you can do with mulberries. You can make wine, preserves, and more."

Lombard continues his efforts with mulberries. He hosts an annual community festival celebrating them and other local foods.

Mulberries are also popular with Lombard's small sheep flock. He gives them leaves and branches he has pruned in the spring, as well as those he thins during the summer. In autumn, they eat the leaves as they fall.

"If we have enough, we'll hang them to dry on ropes strung in the barn and feed them through the winter," says Lombard. "They eat about the first 6 in. of the twigs and strip the bark off the remaining branches. As far as forage goes, I think mulberries are one of the most nutritious trees you can grow. They're incredibly resilient. You can harvest the leaves in the summer, and they'll just grow another crop."

While Lombard's initial effort to establish a living fence failed, he thinks the concept has potential. He imagines livestock harvesting one side and people the other.

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## Osage Orange Trees Can Be Useful

Though they really don't repel spiders, the Osage orange tree's odd-looking fruits are intriguing, and the tree itself has played a part in the agriculture and hunting history of

the U.S. Native to the south-central U.S., the trees are found over much of the U.S. and in parts of Canada.

Mature trees grow 35 to 50 ft. tall with

trunks up to 2 ft. in diameter, with the branches naturally growing into a round shape. Though the trunks are generally too crooked and knotty to harvest for lumber, and thorns make Osage orange trees difficult to maintain, the wood has impressive qualities.

The Osage Indian Nation Tribe likely inspired the name for the tree in the 16th century because they used its wood to make good bows, and it's still used in bows made today. The wood's flexibility was used by French settlers to create wagon wheels that absorbed shock and held up to moisture and mud.

Many trees were cut for firewood. When seasoned properly, Osage orange produces more Btu than any other hardwood, according to FirewoodResource.com. The decay-resistant wood was also used for railroad ties, and it makes long-lasting fence posts.

But one of the most creative uses for the trees was during the mid-1930's when the WPA (Works Progress Administration) included Osage orange trees in the 200 million trees planted in windbreaks over 18,000 miles to prevent soil erosion in the Great Plains.

Homesteaders planted the trees close together to create a thorny hedge and natural

cattle fencing. That use gave the fruit its hedge apple nickname.

The bitter grapefruit-sized fruit is inedible to humans, and squirrels are the only animals to find it palatable. Somehow it gained a reputation for repelling spiders, which has never been scientifically proven. However, when sliced open, the milky sap inside deterred some insects, according to a study from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

According to Pennsylvania State Extension, the tree and its fruit have their uses. The fruit can be part of autumn decorations and look like "brains" for Halloween displays. The wood makes great fence posts and is used to make bows, boats, woodwind instruments, waterfowl game calls, and specialty wood items.

Osage orange is related to fig and mulberry trees and can be grown in Zones 4-9 in most soils. Trees can be started directly from seed.

The trees require maintenance and should not be allowed to become invasive. Thorns make them challenging to cut and control, and the fallen fruit should be picked up and removed.

Just don't plan on using the fruit to repel spiders.