

## Benefits of Free Range

What is so special about S&J's free-range chickens?

Chicken used to be considered a luxury but mass production of fast growing strains has led to chicken being the cheapest meat. But as with so much in life, there is no such thing as a free lunch. What we have gained in "value" we have lost, not just in animal welfare but also in flavour, texture and nutritional value. If you choose a free-range chicken or an organic chicken you should expect to pay more but then treat that chicken as you would a leg of new season Welsh lamb. You are buying succulent, tasty, low fat meat to be savoured, enjoyed and of course used to its maximum.

People often ask why the big price difference. There are several factors but perhaps the most significant is that the farmers who rear conventional chickens may only be making 10 or 20p profit per bird. At this rate you can see why they need to do hundreds of thousands of chickens per unit in order to have a viable business. On smaller units, like ours, there needs to be more margin per bird for a small, extensive system that produces such good flavour, texture and taste to be viable. Inevitably, as a small producer you pay more for your food, straw and chicks than a large scale unit who can command volume discounts.

The Sasso breed of chicken, which we use, are the gourmet's choice for flavour and texture. These chickens are specially developed in France for the free range and organic market, as they combine hardiness and free range abilities with fine flavour and texture. Unlike the Ross/Cobb strain, which the intensive producers use, (the bird you will find in the supermarket), the Sasso is bred to grow slower. It also tends to grow its frame first and then the meat. The Ross/cobb type bird grows its frame and meat at the same time. This can lead to it getting too heavy for its legs. A sign of this, which you can often see in supermarket chickens, is hock burn, a reddening around the legs.

The life of our free-range chickens is a world away from those in intensive units. Our batches are small, between one to two hundred chickens per ark. We buy the birds at day old, as soon as they are off heat, they are let out onto the clover rich pasture. With willows planted in clusters to provide shade and shelter, the birds are free to roam, scratch and explore the pasture during daylight hours. Our birds will be at least 80 days old when slaughtered and will normally be over 100 days; this compares with between 30 and 40 days for the Ross/cobb type.

Once they are large enough, we catch them after dark, when the birds are roosting, to minimize any stress. The birds are then humanely slaughtered and plucked in our small on-farm abattoir. Evisceration or gutting is done by hand which means the insides of every bird are individually checked.

You will usually find the neck, liver and heart in our whole roasting birds. Their healthy diet and lifestyle means the livers are a good source of nutrients including protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, riboflavin, niacin, pantothenic acid, vitamin B6, folate, vitamin B12, iron, phosphorus, copper and selenium and a good source of thiamin, zinc and manganese. Make it into patè or serve it with pasta or bacon and onions.