



Better Science Through Bigfoot

How a fake creature can help you become a better field researcher. By Samantha Larson Page 6



A Dude's Guide to Amy Schumer

The comic's bawdy brand of feminism has lessons for guys, too. By Dave Lake Page 16





Supermarket chicken is bland, flabby, and an ethical nightmare.
But it's not the only option. Meet the Blue-Footed chicken.

Story and photos by Joe Ray

y second favorite chicken story is the one my Canadian friend Nicole tells about her courting days in Paris. She and her beau, Toby, had just moved to the City of Light, and it was the first time they lived together.

Wanting to make a good impression, she petitioned her local poultryman at the Marché des Ternes to let her try cooking a poulet de Bresse, the mythologized French bird so revered that its production methods and the geographical area where it can be produced are certified by French law. It has a red comb, white feathers, steely-blue feet, and a dense flesh with so much flavor that it makes supermarket birds taste watered down by comparison. In France, it's coveted by chefs like Paul Bocuse, who prepares it both as a fricassee with dried morels and en vessie—cooked inside a pig's bladder—and larded with truffles under its skin.

"Non!" Nicole's butcher exclaimed when she asked for one. "You're not ready."

"It took me a while to realize he didn't want me to have a bad experience," Nicole says. He needed to make sure that the foreigner he came to call *la Canadienne* had the chops. If she was going to cook a 40-euro bird, he wanted a happy customer.

After probing the depths of her culinary knowledge over several months of her visits to the market, he pronounced himself satisfied, and wrote out detailed instructions on how to cook the chicken, going as far as inspecting the dried morels she bought for her fricassee.

Here in Fremont's Stone Way Café just two weeks ago, poultryman Riley Starks recounts my *favorite* chicken story, The Blue-Footed Chicken Opera.

It is the 20-year saga of a bird with a red comb, white feathers, and blue feet, just like the *poulet de Bresse*, and how hard it is to breed and raise an incredibly high-quality chicken. It involves good intentions, bad karma, ques-

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tionable border crossings, greed, black-market dealings, money, breeding, feeding, possible "Frankenchickens," and the deaths of two men and hundreds of birds. Eventually the bird would make its way to Carne in Bellingham, the only butcher shop on the planet that sells it, for \$10 per pound. From there it would make its American debut on the menus of some of Seattle's most revered restaurants, including The Herbfarm, Copperleaf, and Tom Douglas joints such as Lola, Etta's, and Dahlia Lounge. And the story ends—for the time being, at least—in the trunk of Starks' car, where right now sits a Styrofoam cooler filled with the bird in question. This is the story of the Poulet Bleu. And Starks is about to tell it to another restaurateur.

He pulls the cooler from his car and marches toward the front door of The Whale Wins, the highly regarded restaurant run by chef Renée Erickson. A miscommunication with Erickson's team meant Starks is essentially making a cold call, but he's confident.

"This is a fucking good bird," he says, "and I'll be damned if I'm not going to let them know about it."

Starks is best known as the former owner of The Willows Inn on Lummi Island—the man who coaxed star chef Blaine Wetzel away from Copenhagen's top-ranked Noma to run the Inn's kitchen in late 2010. Wetzel would become one of the region's most celebrated chefs, racking up two James Beards Awards in the past two years, including Best Chef: Northwest.

Prior to purchasing The Willows, Starks had a history as a poultryman, running a pasta com-

pany that needed huge quantities of eggs. He bought 50 egg-laying hens in 1994, and eventually ramped up his operations to the point where he bred chickens at his Lummi Island property, The Nettles Farm, eventually selling 6,000 meat birds a year and dispatching them at his own USDA-certified processing plant.

But under Wetzel, The Willows' growth accelerated near-exponentially. They had to hire many more kitchen, dining, and support staff, and the wheels started rattling. By 2012, the mom-and-pop inn had become a mid-sized business, outgrowing Starks' skill set. He decided to sell, left the island, and moved into a small Bellingham apartment where he could never bring himself to completely empty his boxes.

Starks did manage to unpack his Big Green Egg grill and haul it out onto his tiny apartment balcony, though. He wanted to grill some chicken for himself. Starks headed for the refrigerated case, like anyone else. He went to Trader Joe's, Haggen, and the Community Food Co-op, and bought the best chicken each had to offer.

"Every day I cooked a different bird, and they were all crap," says Starks. "They were Cornish Crosses, and they were all crap."

Starks has long held that the conversation about chicken is ripe for change. The industry processes 160,000,000 birds a week in the United States—a staggering number consisting almost entirely of the Cornish Cross, a chicken that has been bred not to taste good, but to grow fast on cheap food in conditions that regularly set animal-rights groups howling.

Bernie Nash, who runs the Ephrata-based Mad Hatcher Poultry, called Starks not long after the disappointing chicken experience. The two had met 12 years prior, when Starks sold Nash some chicken-processing equipment. Nash



now wanted to know if Starks was interested in raising a blue-footed chicken. The two got to talking, and Starks realized that in the 12 years since he'd left chickens, nobody had bothered trying to breed a better bird.

"Pasture-raised, organic, air-chilled? Yes. But that's skirting the question," says Starks, who thinks that question should be "What kind of bird is it?" "You can't make the Cornish Cross into a good chicken. It doesn't have the genes for it."

Nash asked Starks if he'd like to work together to remedy the problem, using a breed based on the *poulet de Bresse*.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Starks' store-bought birds, a *poulet de Bresse* must meet stringent standards to earn the name, including giving it room to roam, keeping the flock size down, and feeding it a high-quality diet. As a result, Bresse birds have a depth of flavor that most Americans have, quite simply, never experienced in a chicken. As French epicure Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin put it, the *poulet de Bresse* is "the queen of poultry and the poultry of kings." It is a completely different bird.

Starks' reply to Nash was simple: Yes.





Immediately, Nash got on the horn with the only person who could help them, a Canadian chicken breeder named Peter Thiessen.

Back in the late 1980s or early 1990s, another flock of poultrymen sat around a table at a farm in British Columbia. A feed nutritionist slid a newspaper clipping across the table to Thiessen, who ran Thiessen Game Birds in Mount Lehman, B.C. The article was about the legendary poulet de Bresse, and the nutritionist wanted to know why there weren't birds that good in North America. Thiessen immediately

started looking into buying some breeding stock

"They said 'Non! Absolutely not,' "says Thiessen's son, David, now owner of his own company, Thiessen Specialty Poultry, "but Dad's thing was always breeding birds, and he loved it when someone told him he couldn't do something."

Unable to purchase a better bird, Peter Thiessen forged ahead to create one. Inspired by the poulet de Bresse, he began to pull the best characteristics from a pool of favorite birds. Asking his son which breeds they used is like asking the CEO of Coca-Cola for their recipe.

"That's a secret," says David. "They're on a list somewhere at my mom's house. I can tell you that there were 17 different birds crossed to make the breed. There's a tiny Malaysian chicken bred into this bird; it has blue feet. I believe there's some Rhode Island Red in there. You'll have to guess the other 15."

As important as the breeds involved are to the breeding process, know-how is just as crucial to build a new flock: creating rooster and hen lines to prevent inbreeding; creating "grandparent" stock, a pristine control group to fall back on if things go awry; and building "parent" stock, the birds that end up being sold.

Peter started with 400 chicks, pairing each of the secret breeds with another, working to form perfected hybrids he'd breed with other perfected hybrids, whittling his way toward the quintessential bird.

"Breeding is constant. Selecting is constant. You always want to be consistent with the attributes you breed into a bird," says David. "The Poulet Bleu chicken has a nice, plump breast. You wouldn't want to mix in a bird without them. If a few black feathers sprout among the white ones, you don't want that.'

Engineering the bird that he christened the Mount Lehman Chicken took Peter 11 years.

In 2004, Thiessen Game Birds, which dealt in fowl like squab in Canada and the U.S., sold breeding stock—birds that could be used to reproduce (and then be sold to restaurants and supermarkets)—to California poultryman Bob Shipley at the Squab Producers of California cooperative. Shipley had big plans for the bird, which he rechristened the Blue-Footed.

In the meantime, up in Canada, a catastrophe was unfurling. Avian flu—an influenza virus adapted to attack fowl-swept the country, killing vast numbers of birds. A week after Peter Thiessen sold the breeding stock to Shipley, the U.S./Canada border was closed to bird transport. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Canada's version of the USDA, euthanized Peter's birds, leaving Shipley with the whole kit and caboodle, the only breeding stock of the Blue-Footed.

This is where things went squirrelly.

Peter asked Shipley to sell him back some of the breeding stock so that he could continue breeding the birds in Canada. While Shipley didn't exactly say 'Non!', David Thiessen claims that Shipley set a price three times higher than what he'd originally paid. Peter told him to take a flying leap. "Dad told him, 'I bred that bird once, you think I can't do it again?' "says David.

That's exactly what Peter did, starting all over again with his 17 secret breeds. His earlier successful attempt helped him shave about four years off the process—this time it took seven vears instead of 11.

Shipley completely denies that Peter ever made that call. Instead, he says, he thought Peter had secreted a few birds away and "moved them up-country." Until I spoke with him for this story, Shipley assumed this was how Peter started over with the breeding. David calls the "up-country" theory hogwash.

Back in California, in the mid-2000s, Shipley had a lock on the breed, and his big plans were coming together. He was in a position to change the game and lead a new conversation about chicken and what it should be in a country that was primed to go bananas for organic, local, and artisanal food. He had the chicken world by the short feathers.

He started selling his birds to top-tier New York City establishments, including Thomas Keller's Per Se, Tom Colicchio's Craft, and even Alain Ducasse's Essex House, moving many of the birds through high-end New Jersey specialty-food purveyor D'Artagnan.

And then, by some accounts, he completely

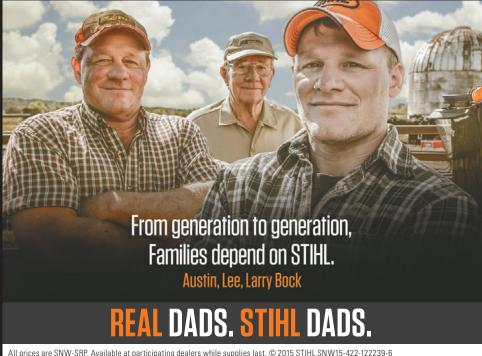
David Thiessen would later hear through a veterinarian who worked with the Squab Producers of California that Shipley, at the time the cooperative's president, had tried to refine his chickens even further in an apparent attempt to make either a fatter bird or one that would plump faster. According to the vet, the bird lost the flavor and texture that high-end chefs wanted. Instead, he created what industry folk call a Frankenchicken.

It wasn't an insurmountable problem, but for one key detail: Shipley hadn't kept the grandparent stock. There was nothing to fall back on-no control group.

"Things fell apart. They processed the whole flock. They killed them," says David, who is surprisingly even-keeled about the whole affair, going as far as calling Shipley "not a bad guy,"

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which could owe a fair amount to the fact that Thiessen still does business with the Squab Producers of California.

Amazingly, David says Shipley even called his father after the mishap, asking for more birds—a call that Nash, who was visiting Peter at the time, says he overheard.

"Dad did chuckle. I think he called it karma," says David. "But regardless, we didn't have the birds." Peter was only at the beginning of his seven-year rebreeding process—and, anyway, in his opinion, Shipley wasn't entitled to more.

Shipley flatly denies all of this, abruptly ending our conversation the first time I ask him about this part of the story. Later, he calls back to offer a very different version of what happened. By his account, the Blue-Footed "wasn't a good converter of feed," meaning that compared to other birds, it ate a lot of expensive food before processing. In Shipley's large-scale plant, processing a few hundred chickens a week just didn't make sense.

"When we ended the program, it was a perfectly good bird. We didn't have enough sales to justify the program. . . . We couldn't do that amount to make it warm and fuzzy," Shipley says. "With the price we had to charge, even the super-high-end restaurants wanted out."

A call to D'Artagnan CEO Ariane Daugin bears some of this out. Shipping expensive birds cross-country to resell to high-end restaurants made it exceedingly difficult to get what she calls the "critical volume" to make it work.

"Their plane ticket was huge," says Daugin, before adding that Shipley "presented them to me as the *poulet de Bresse*. Bob called and said he had some true *poulet de Bresse* eggs from France, and I got very excited. He told me he got them from a Canadian." *Sacre bleu!*

This ruffles both David Thiessen's and Shipley's feathers. Shipley denies it outright. David doesn't like the implication that "the bird my dad bred was [ever] anything other than the bird he bred from crossing 17 different kinds of chickens," says Thiessen.

By the mid-2000s, Shipley had contracted out the growing of the birds (a common industry practice) to a now-defunct California outfit called Central Coast Fryers, who euthanized the birds when he decided he wanted out of the business.

Except maybe not all of them.

"I told them I wanted the birds [the carcasses] back, but they said they were already dead and gone. Later I heard that a couple crates [of live birds] had been shipped to someone in Sacramento Valley," Shipley says, raising the possibility that someone in California might still be hawking the red, white, and blue birds out of the back of a truck.

In any case, Shipley was finished with the Blue-Footed, saying, "It wasn't my business anymore. I was done."

Bernie Nash discovered the *poulet de Bresse* in 2009, during a meeting with then-Herbfarm chef Keith Luce.

"[Luce] came to me and asked if I could come up with something like the French *poulet de Bresse*," says Nash, "and I said, 'What the hell's that?' "Once he looked the bird up, he needed no further convincing. It was when Nash found out, through the poultry farmers' grapevine, about Peter Thiessen's second round of breeding that Nash called Starks, forming the duo that was long on chicken experience and short on funds.

"I'm not endowed with a lot of money, and genetics cost a lot," says Nash, who liked what 12 he saw with Peter's birds, recognizing that, as he





"Think of all the time and the trouble . . . and there we were in the parking lot at the ARCO gas station . . . and made the transfer."

says, "Genetics are genetics. That's what ruined Bob Shipley. He tried to improve on the wheel, but it was already round as far as genetics go."

Three years later, Starks and Nash drove north to visit Peter—whom Starks invariably refers to as "a tough old bird himself"—and came away with the terms for a deal that would require them to raise \$350,000 to buy a small breeding flock.

No longer running The Willows, Starks was ready to get back into the game. Inspired by the \$460,000 crowdfunding effort behind Seattle restaurant Luc, Starks and Nash followed suit, trying to do something similar for the Poulet Bleu.

"I thought we had a pretty good mailing list," says Starks. "So we tried it."

They fell \$320,000 short of their goal.

Undaunted, the team—which by mid-2013 had added Luce; Roy Breiman, culinary director at Copperleaf at Cedarbrook Lodge; lawyer and businessman Jon Kobayashi; and Nash's son Lowell to its ranks—went to Burgundy, aka poulet de Bresse central, to bond. There they happened upon Les Glorieuses de Bresse, a multiday, multitown festival dedicated to the chicken. They met farmers who butchered 200 birds a day, and visited chef/farmer Frédéric Ménager, who'd worked with iconic French chefs before becoming a farmer himself, eventually cooking elaborate meals for 24 at his farm, La Ruchotte.

More important, the trip was a glimpse of the way people came together around a bird of incredible quality, and a chance to imagine how they could make it work on a manageable, healthy scale.

One farmer they bonded with even tried to send Starks breeding eggs in the mail, actually declaring them as such on the customs label. "I got a call from a San Francisco customs agent who destroyed the eggs and reminded me that she could arrest me," says Starks.



She didn't, but once the Poulet Bleu team got back to Washington and there were no prospects for raising anywhere close to \$350,000, the wheels officially fell off.

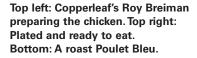
"We had hopes!" remembers Starks. "I can't remember what those hopes were, but they went away. I just . . . kinda . . . gave up."

For a while, nothing happened, but Nash kept alive the connection with Peter Thiessen. In the spring of 2014, Nash approached his own father, Lowell Nash, a dairyman who once presided over a herd of Jersey cows, and asked for a loan. Lowell, whose health was waning, realized he would die soon, and didn't want a loan clogging the will and creating conflict between the brothers. He died the very day Bernie planned to call Peter Thiessen to bow out of the project.

Once the dust settled, Nash's brothers helped him "get the cold, hard cash for the birds faster because they knew I needed it." Nash and Peter struck a deal: Nash and his partners would pay half of the \$350,000 up front, then, after a year, pay \$3,000 per month with no interest until the second half was paid in full.

They shook hands. A short while after, Peter went into the hospital with what's been described as "a small problem." He died three weeks later.

In August 2014, following another border crossing, and with the help of David Thiessen, who had decided to honor his father's agreement with Nash, the Poulet Bleu team took custody of some 250 birds, which included a flock of breeding hens and about 25 roosters.



"Think of all the time and the trouble and the angst that went into making this happen," says Starks, "and there we were in the parking lot at the ARCO gas station off Slater Road in Bellingham and made the transfer."

Initially, the majority of the birds went to Ephrata with Nash; some went with Starks to Lummi Island, where he'd moved back to The Nettles Farm; and some stayed with Thiessen in Canada as a triple-geographic safeguard against avian flu. Later, most of the production birds would be grown by Achin-Back Farms in Castle Rock, Wash.

Now that the birds were stateside, the Poulet Bleu team needed to figure out how to feed them, and by extension how to make them taste right.

"The Cornish get corn. Soy. That's pretty much it," says Nash, explaining how those ingredients yield bland results. They looked at what Peter Thiessen had used, particularly the dried peas that create a pleasant sweetness in the flesh. Instead of adding milk, as the French often do, to create a mash, Nash added easier-to-use milk replacer, which he describes as "like a fatty milk powder."

Along with the dried peas, the birds diet included flax, canola oil, and a bit of soy—an amazing diversity compared to standard Cornish Cross fare. Raising the Poulet Bleu for more than four months allows them to develop flavor and firms the texture of the meat, something that almost never happens with the industrialized Cornish Cross, usually processed at around five weeks.

With a nutritionist, they came up with a threestage diet: a protein-rich starter feed, a statureincreasing growing feed, and, to fatten them, a finishing feed. "If you had an infant, you'd give them formula," explains Nash by way of analogy, "then they graduate to solid food. Then when they're a teen, they start eating junk food and bulk up."

But he hadn't counted on the effects of the milk replacer. The birds were fine through their first four weeks, but once they switched to the growing feed with the milk replacer, they went bonkers. "By the time they hit 12 weeks, it was

Here he recounts a *Lord of the Flies*—style raging-chicken rape scene, but goes on to explain that they were able to fix the problem by swapping out the milk replacer for dried whey and dropping the growing feed altogether.

I tasted the birds as they developed through different feed regimens, from Thiessen's test birds to early Poulet Bleu experiments. There was both constant progress and a clear need to understand how to cook the bird, as its dense flesh requires different treatment than a supermarket bird. This is a major issue for potential retailers, who worry about how customers will react to its differences from a Cornish Cross.

I had it roasted, I had it slow-grilled in Starks' Big Green Egg, and I cooked it sous vide. Far better chefs than I cooked it for me.

Every time I had it, it was good—and every time I wished it was better. You could see where Starks, Nash, Luce, and Breiman were heading, but it was never quite there. But then, after a final tweak in the past few weeks, Team Poulet Bleu pronounced itself satisfied with the feeding regimen, and the birds began to appear on highly respectable Seattle restaurant menus.

Breiman got it first at the Copperleaf this May, creating a sous vide roulade with the breasts, then wrapping them in bacon. Next to it, he pushed the envelope a bit, with a quenelle of shredded meat that was like a flavor-packed rillette—a treatment that would almost certainly fail with a relatively flabby and insipid Cornish Cross.

At The Herbfarm, chef Chris Weber serves a Poulet Bleu breast from a bird cooked on the rotisserie alongside mint, peas, and fava beans. "Chicken is ripe to be rediscovered for its toothsome texture and flavor," says Herbfarm owner Ron Zimmerman. "Those who have dined on the poulet de Bresse in France . . . will appreciate the Poulet Bleu. Yes, the price is and will seem high when compared to factory birds. Some will find the bird tough rather than toothsome. But just as properly handled Copper River King salmon has an exalted culinary niche over farmed fish or fish that run easy rivers, so too will the Poulet Bleu find an audience with those who favor quality over quantity, authenticity over faceless expediency.'

Still, I needed to convince myself by cooking it at home. I thought of Nicole and those classic French recipes, and—though lacking a pig's bladder to cook my bird in-I started a fricassee with one of Starks' birds.

The difference was huge. The raw flesh had a healthy pink color, light in the breasts and deep in the thighs. Laid out on a half-sheet pan, the eight pieces of the broken-down bird looked like pristine sushi. Within moments of putting them in the Dutch oven, they passed a viscosity on to the cooking liquid as if I'd added a full cup of chicken glaze.

The flesh was firm enough to need a paring knife. The breasts retained a slightly rosy hue, and the thighs were as dense and flavorful as those of a top-flight game bird. It tasted nothing like a supermarket chicken.

A few days later, I heated the leftover sauce and served it over rice. When I spilled half of the sauce inside a reusable Trader Joe's bag, I scraped it off the bottom with a spatula and returned it to my bowl. When I ran out of rice, I ate it like soup. It was that good. SE

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Food and travel writer Joe Ray is the co-author, with Blaine Wetzel, of the forthcoming Willows Inn cookbook and travelogue, Sea and Smoke (Running Press, \$40). He spent a year living on Lummi Island writing it.







