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Selecting and Preparing Table Poultry

By R. VAGG, Poultry Instructor, and M. W. G. CRITCHELL, Poultry Inspector

The two main classes of poultry used for table purposes in Western Australia are “roasting fowls,” which are usually young cockerels or capons and “boiling fowls,” which are mainly hens that have passed their most productive laying periods. The distinction is not an arbitrary one, as the so-called boiling fowls—if cooked slowly—can be roasted quite successfully and are preferred by many people. In addition to the two main classes, there is a growing demand for younger, smaller birds for frying and for barbecue meals.

The bulk of the table birds used are from two main heavy breeds—Australorp and Rhode Island Red—or the lighter but quicker-growing First Cross birds from White Leghorn-Australorp matings. The First-Cross males are popular as “roasters” at the 12 to 14-week-old stage.

The age at which birds should be killed for roasting, will depend largely upon the weight of carcass required. A 12 to 14-week-old male bird should have a live-weight of about 3 lb., and one 20 weeks old will be about 5 lb. liveweight. The dressed weight is usually from two-thirds to three-quarters of the liveweight, so that birds of 3 lb. and 5 lb. liveweight should dress out at approximately 2 lb. and 3½ lb. respectively.

Choosing a Suitable Bird

The ideal table bird is the capon—a male bird that has been surgically de-sexed. Birds so treated may be fed to heavy weights without losing the tenderness and delicate flavour usually associated with younger and lighter birds, but caponising by surgical operation has never become popular in Australia owing to the restricted market for high-priced table poultry.
A popular alternative is the chemically-caponised bird—often referred to as a "caponette." The caponette is a young male bird in which the normal secretions of the male sex glands have been neutralised. This is achieved by implanting a pellet containing synthetic female sex hormones under the skin of the neck. These hormones are gradually absorbed into the system and temporarily produce similar results to surgical caponising—a distribution of fat through the muscular tissues, with improved flesh and skin texture.

If purchasing cockerels, make sure that the birds are young. The shanks should be smooth and no spurs should have developed, as the appearance of spurs indicates that the bird has reached an age when the texture and flavour of its flesh has commenced to deteriorate.

In a young bird, the bone structure is soft and pliable. The end of the breastbone, in particular, should be more of the nature of cartilage—springy and flexible under pressure.

**KILLING**

Food should be withheld from the birds for about 24 hours prior to killing, but adequate supplies of clean water should always be available.

This ensures that the alimentary tract will be empty and makes for cleaner dressing with better-flavoured flesh.
Dislocation of the neck—if expertly performed—is probably the best method of killing a bird. It is quick and clean and does not involve spattering the clothes of the operator with blood—which usually occurs when the axe and chopping block are used.

Fig. 1 shows how the bird is held. The left hand holds the legs and the right hand (if the operator is right handed) is placed on the neck with the thumb to the rear and the fingers forward. With the bird held head downward against the outside of the operator’s right thigh, a quick downward pull with a simultaneous anticlockwise twist of the wrist will break the neck. The thumb (not visible in photograph) presses upward under the beak as the fingers press downward, so that as the pull is completed the hand turns and finishes with the little finger upward and the palm turned outward to the right.

The neck and blood vessels should break cleanly and the bird should be held for about a minute so that the blood can drain into the cavity caused by the dislocation.

**REMOVING THE FEATHERS**

Most home poultry-dressers will find that plucking is facilitated if the bird is first dipped into sufficient hot water to cover the carcass.

The ideal temperature of the water will vary according to the type of bird being treated, but it should be between 145° F. and 212° F. (boiling point). For most birds, the rule-of-thumb method of three parts of boiling water to one part of cold will give good results.

The bird should be immersed for about 30 seconds (in the case of cockerels or capons) or about 40 seconds for a boiling fowl, and it should be rotated so that the water penetrates to the skin.

Remove the bird from the hot water and, if too hot to handle comfortably, give a quick dip in cold water. Start by remov-
Fig. 9—which is then cut off close to the body

Pin-feathers may be removed by rubbing with a handful of loose feathers.

Special care should be exercised in plucking cockerels and capons as their skin and flesh will tear readily. Older birds can withstand rougher handling.

**DRESSING**

The first step in preparing a fowl for the table should be to draw the sinews from the legs as shown in Figs 6 and 7. This greatly improves the eating quality of the "drumstick" portion.

The next stage is to make a cut across the skin of the neck near the body and then slit the skin towards the head, running the knife under the skin along the back of the neck (Fig. 8). The neck is cut off close to the body (Fig. 9) and the head is removed, leaving a flap of skin which is used to cover the aperture. After severing the head and neck the crop may be removed (Fig. 10) and the internal organs loosened with the fingers.

The flap of loose skin is folded over the hole and held in position by folding the wings inward then outward over the back and shoulders (Fig. 11).

Next cut between the vent and the "parson's nose" and then make a knife-cut encircling the vent so that it is freed from all surrounding attachments (Figs.

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Figs. 10 and 11.—The crop is removed through the neck opening and a flap of skin is folded over the aperture where it is held in position by the wings which are twisted to fold over the back.
Figs. 12 and 13.—A cut is made between the vent and the tail (left) and continued round so as to free the vent—

12 and 13). Insert the fingers into the body cavity and loosen the entrails then withdraw them with a strong steady pull (Fig. 14.)

This should leave the body cavity empty except for the lungs which will be found closely adhering to the back portion of the bird, well forward towards the shoulders. Pressure with the tips of the fingers inside the body cavity will loosen the lungs and care should be taken to remove them cleanly as the lung tissue decomposes readily in warm weather.

The carcass should be wiped with a damp cloth both inside and out, but should not be washed as excess moisture encourages decomposition.

To truss the bird for the oven, pass a length of strong white cord round the “parson’s nose” and tie securely leaving two long ends (Fig 15). The ends are passed round the hock joints, then crossed under the legs, passed round the “parson’s nose” again and pulled tight before tying. (Fig. 16.)

To give a neater appearance to the carcass, some people remove the stumps of the shanks before trussing. When the legs are cut off at the hock joints however, the meat is liable to slip away from the bones in cooking leaving the “drumstick” bones partially exposed.

The neck, gizzard, heart, liver and shanks may be retained for soup-making. The gizzard is opened and the yellow lining peels away freely. The legs should be dipped in boiling water for a few seconds after which the outer skin and claws may be removed easily.

DRESSING DUCKS

Ducks and geese have feathers which shed water readily due to the secretions from special oil glands. Because of this the plucking of these birds presents some difficulties and water temperatures and scalding periods are important.
Killing by neck dislocation is difficult in the case of water-fowl, and beheading with the axe is the method usually adopted. Hold the bird firmly by the legs and wing-tips, lay the head and neck on a wooden block and sever the head by a blow from a sharp axe or hatchet.

Ducks are very strong and care should be taken to avoid injury from their sharp claws in the reflex action which occurs after the head is cut off. When movement has ceased and bleeding is completed, the bird should be dipped in water, heated to about 120° F., in which a tablespoonful of any good detergent has been added to each gallon of water. Move the bird around in this water for about a minute until the plumage is thoroughly wetted.

Next dip the bird in water (without detergent) heated to about 180° F. and proceed with the plucking, dipping quickly in and out of cold water first, and then removing the wing and tail feathers as recommended previously.

Waterfowl grow and replace their downy feathers about every 14 days and the plucking is best performed when the pin-feathers are well-developed—between the 7 and 14-day growth period.

**PREPARED POULTRY PACKS**

It may not be generally known that in addition to supplying dressed carcasses of various weights and classes, commercial poulterers in Perth put up special cellophane packs of chicken portions such as drumsticks, thighs, wings and breasts.

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