

## Chick chick chick chick chicken

### *Kiri Degon traces the history of chicken in our diets*

The role of the domestic chicken in society has changed dramatically. Chickens were first domesticated from red jungle fowl in South-east Asia around 10,500 years ago, not for eating but for cockfighting.

Until the advent of large-scale industrial production in the 20th century, the economic and nutritional contribution of chickens was modest. Now, however, chickens are the most pervasive food of our era, the UK's favourite meat.

Just under 50 per cent of all meat sold in the UK is poultry. In fact it's estimated that 95 per cent of the UK population eat chicken at least twice a week. This works out at around 6.3 billion occasions a year when chicken is eaten.

Why do we choose chicken over other meat? It's relatively cheap and is thought to have relatively low levels of fat and high levels of protein. However, the nutritional value of chicken has undergone a vast change in past decades.

Compared to a chicken in 1940, a chicken in 2004 contained twice as much fat, a third more calories and a third less protein. These changes are thought to be largely due to an increase in intensive farming practices. For example, chickens are fed a highly calorific feed, are selectively bred for genes that aid rapid weight gain, and are forced into cramped living conditions with little or no space to move.

### **The rise of the chicken shop**

Fried chicken is growing in popularity as the UK's favourite fast-food dish. Coupled with the change in the nutritional value of the meat, this means that chicken is playing its part in the national obesity epidemic.

Covering chicken in batter and then deep-frying it in trans fat increases its fat content by 70 per cent. London has more than 8,000 fried-chicken shops – that's one shop for every 1,000 people. Young people are the keenest customers.

## **ABOUT THIS RESOURCE**

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## Chickens of the future

Without intensive farming, a chicken would naturally take about 14 weeks to grow fully. Today, an intensively farmed 2 kg chicken is produced in just six weeks. As we continue to breed chickens to suit consumer demand, what we understand a chicken to be may change.

In her stories, author Margaret Atwood envisages a future where chickens resemble objects more than animals – a genetically modified headless, featureless, fleshy mass of meat with brain functions related only to digestion and growth.

A bird bred with the function only of reproducing specific cuts of meat may sound like a solution to the growing desire for chicken. But, even if it were possible, could such an approach be justified from ethical, economic and nutritional standpoints?

## REFERENCES

- [‘Why Did the Chicken Cross the World? The epic saga of the bird that powers civilization’–](#)
- [British Poultry Council](#)
- [Modern organic and broiler chickens provide more energy from fat than protein \(2009\)](#)
- [Public Health at Cambridge: Fast food takeaways grow more rapidly in poorest areas](#)
- [Margaret Atwood on ChickieNobs](#)

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Chickens have been bred for cockfighting and meat. What other things could we breed chickens for?
- Read Margaret Atwood on ChickieNobs (see the bottom reference above). What do you think of her vision of chickens in the future? Would you eat meat from such a creature?
- With a predicted population of 10 billion people in 2050, the world’s demand for chickens will increase. How do you think a chicken in 2050 might compare to one today?

## FURTHER READING

- [Breeding chickens for better welfare: genetic goals for broiler chickens and their parents \(2012\)](#)
- [Big Picture: Ethical aspects of fat - exploring the effects of selective breeding](#)

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