



Chris Frederick with one of his chickens. Opposite, from left to right: Paul and Chris discuss the flock; happy little chicks; Daniel Nowland meets one of the super chooks.

top of the flocks

Jamie gathered together a team of experts to rear the most delicious free-range chicken in the business

Words **Claire Nelson** Photography **Matt Munro**

Chris Frederick doesn't rush things. Here on his farm in Essex he rears Hubbard chickens, a slow-growing breed that, as he tells me, makes for a better product. "I wanted to grow something that tastes better and you could get a sense of satisfaction out of growing."

Clearly he was the right man to call upon for Jamie's special project – to create the best-tasting chicken around. Of course, such an experiment was going to require experience from all sides.

"To get real flavour you have to grow the birds to full maturity," explains Jamie's friend, turkey farmer Paul Kelly. "The dilemma there is that you have a really big chicken. And what do you do with a 3.5kg chicken?"

But that's precisely where Paul steps in – his years of expertise in processing some of the country's best turkeys means he and his team are well equipped to handle the size of Jamie's super birds. He collects the mature chickens from Chris and takes care of the inevitable before dry-plucking them – a meticulous process that avoids the risk of nasties that comes

from the automated water treatments of commercial processes. "This is artisan production," says Paul. "It's chicken as it was produced 100 years ago."

While most chickens will grow to between 32 and 36 days old, of the 8,000 birds on Chris' farm, 500 – set aside for Jamie – will reach a whopping 90-plus. "I think one of the key things is not just the fact that it's Hubbard, but that it's Hubbard grown to a certain number of days," says Chris.

The plump birds strutting around the paddock when we visit are already 82 days old. They seem calm and contented, scratching in the grass, unrestricted by fences or pens – it's the sort of poultry idyll you see illustrated on free-range egg carton labels.

"This is more like free-range plus," says Daniel Nowland, a key member of Jamie's team of food standards and welfare experts. He explains that for a bird to be labelled free-range by EU standards, it only needs to have access to the outdoors for half of its life – and that the quality of environment provided with that can vary widely between producers.

But the chickens bred here always have the freedom of fresh grass and shrubs, full of insects to eat and good soil to scratch around in. "A free-range chicken from the supermarket, say, could be very different from a free-range chicken from Chris," says Daniel.

And Jamie's chickens are the crème de la crème. Growing these 'free-range plus' birds to their full natural size makes for something truly special – more meat, more juicy, intramuscular fat and superior flavour. Proof that producing happy birds as naturally as possible leaves a better taste in everyone's mouth. ●

Buy one of Jamie's super chickens from Paul Kelly (info@kellyturkeys.com) or order from London's Barbecoa Butchery shop (020 3375 5553).

