

Modern breeding produces genetically superior chicken

Sixty years ago, it could take up to 16 weeks to grow a three-pound chicken fit for eating.

The breasts would be very small. The meat itself would be tougher because of the bird's age.

Today, things have changed. Poultry farmers are growing larger, five-pound chickens in about six weeks. That's on less than 10 pounds of feed.

Over time, Auburn University poultry science professor Sarge Bilgili said farmers learned there was a negative correlation between chickens used for egg production and meat. Egg-type chickens were leaner because they were putting all of their resources into laying eggs, while broiler chickens were laying fewer eggs because they had more muscle and flesh.

While there are a number of egg, meat and multi-purpose chicken strains available today, Bilgili said breeding companies continue to develop birds for the best possible growth and performance.

"They select for good immune response, disease resistance, strong legs, good feathering, meat quality traits, and improved feed efficiency, so that they would convert the feed nutrients more efficiently to meat and eggs," he said.

Mike Lacy, department head and poultry science professor at the University of Georgia in Athens, said all U.S. broiler chickens are raised cage-free, but the tight quarters can be hard for some birds. Some die from heart attacks, have metabolic issues, suffer leg problems and experience other growth-related maladies, but geneticists have "done an amazing job" of breeding those weaker characteristics out of flocks over the years, he said.

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