

# My Free-Range Chicken Won't Come Home

by John Farrow

The day I discovered that people in San Francisco don't eat Rice-a-Roni was one of the worst days of my life. I had been brought up to believe that if I ate Rice-a-Roni, I would fit right in amongst *le tout* San Francisco. Just like eating Corn Flakes and Wonder Bread would make me grow up to be like Mighty Mouse.

But I can remember the waiter's eyes narrowing and his nostrils flaring out as his back stiffened at the thought that a customer might deign to ask for Rice-a-Roni, which his restaurant -- being, of course, a high-class establishment -- would never even think of serving. My youthful naiveté was gone forever.

Rice-a-Roni is, of course, no more the San Francisco treat than French fries are French or most Russian caviars are Russian. Is nothing real any more? At some point you feel like the little boy watching his idol, Shoeless Joe Jackson, as he entered the courthouse for his trial on charges of helping the White Sox throw the 1919 World Series: you want to cry out, "Say it ain't so, Joe!" But alas, things are not always as they seem.

So it is with the ostensible "organic" and other "green" foods that are so popular today and that many of us consume in our never-ending quest to be the healthiest that we can be. In truth, it is virtually impossible to know what "organic" means, as only the states of California and Oregon have standards for such foods. Blind taste tests of "organic" and commercially-produced foods indicate that the two are virtually indistinguishable. As for cleanliness, forget it. Many organic foods are loaded with germs.

Bottled water is no better. Aquafina, like many other bottled waters available in the US, is no more than "purified water" from "municipal sources." Translation: tap water. Nothing wrong with that, of course -- but is it worth paying extra for?

And then there is free-range chicken. Notwithstanding the fact that most so-called "free-range" chickens are not free in any sense of the

word, their taste has also been found to be indistinguishable from supermarket birds. Further, they can actually be dirtier, having picked up God-knows-what in their wanderings.

My one experience with free-range chicken was most memorable indeed. It occurred in the West African country of Ghana. While Ghanaian dishes such as palm-nut soup and *gari foto* are actually quite tasty, after a year of eating mostly local foods, my wife and I had developed a craving for some honest-to-goodness, down home, American-style roast chicken.

Of course, we couldn't just go over and pick up a fresh package or two of prepared chicken from the meat section of the local supermarket. In fact, in that part of Africa chickens were kept mainly for their eggs and only at the end of their useful egg-producing lives were they eaten. Until then, they spent their days roaming around eating bugs the size of small rodents and avoiding predators such as crocodiles, cobras, pythons and black mambas.

So if you were lucky enough to find a chicken for sale, that bird had been one serious survivor. And it was such a chicken that we brought home from a neighbor's house that fateful day.

Once beheaded and plucked and cut up, we basted him in the most savory Fannie Farmer recipe we could find and put him in the oven to cook. Meanwhile, I opened a bottle of French wine brought back from a trip to near-by Togo, put some rice on to cook and prepared a huge lettuce, tomato and avocado salad. Before long the succulent smells of roasting chicken began to fill the kitchen.

Finally, the table was set, a couple of friends had arrived to help us enjoy the meal and the chicken looked delicious. Out it came from the oven to "oohs" and "aahs" and a toast to fine food and good friends. It was time to partake of an American delicacy.

The first thing we noticed, however, was that the meat was a little difficult to cut. "But the gravy is delicious," someone remarked. "Maybe it's not quite done," someone else said. Back into the oven it went. Just in case, I sharpened my Swiss army knife.

After another 20 minutes or so, out it

came again, a little crunchy around the edges but otherwise surely done now. However, the meat still resisted our flatware and my Swiss army knife only succeeded in scoring the surface of this leathery bird. It even defied the blade of a guest's large Bowie knife. "Excellent wine, John," someone consoled.

Ultimately, my wife decided to give all the pieces to the cat, who gratefully accepted a breast and settled in on the porch outside the screen door to enjoy her good fortune. But soon we heard a hiss and then a low, drawn-out snarl, quickly followed by a thump and then several high-pitched yowls.

We looked outside to see the cat dancing around, slinging the chicken from side to side, desperately ripping at it, eyes wide and ablaze. But no luck. Finally she stood on it with all four feet, sank her fangs in and tore with every ounce of strength she had. Not a fiber budged.

After this tooth and claw battle, the cat finally conceded defeat and sulked off into the darkness. She didn't come home for three days and even then she eyed us with disdain.

So, consider yourselves forewarned. And if you are planning on having free-range chicken for dinner, please include me out.

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