

## Breeding chickens

We have made it easy not to think about what chickens were before we find them on our plates. I live, most of the time, less than an hour's drive from Gainesville, Georgia, the self-described **Poultry Capital of the World**, where the modern chicken industry was born. Georgia raises 1.4 billion **broilers** a year, making it the single biggest contributor to the almost 9 billion birds raised each year in the United States; if it were an independent nation, it would ranking chicken production somewhere near China and Brazil. Yet you could drive around for hours without ever knowing you were in the heart of chicken country, unless you happened to get behind a truck **heaped** with **crates** of birds on their way from the **remote solid-walled barns** they are raised in to the **gated slaughter plants** where they are turned into meat. [...]

I discovered that the reason American chicken tastes so different from those I ate everywhere else was that in the United States, we breed for everything but flavor: for abundance, for consistency, for speed. Many things made that transformation possible. But as I came to understand, the single biggest influence was that, consistently over decades, we have been feeding chickens, and almost every other meat animal, routine doses of antibiotics on almost every day of their lives. Antibiotics do not create **blandness**, but they created the conditions that allowed chicken to be bland, allowing us to turn a **skittish**, active backyard bird into a fast growing, slow-moving, docile block of protein, as **muscle-bound** and top-heavy as a bodybuilder in a kid's cartoon.

At this moment, most meat animals, across most of the planet, are raised with the assistance of doses of antibiotics on most days of their lives: 63,151 tons of antibiotics per year, about 126 million pounds. Farmers began using the drugs because antibiotics allowed animals to convert feed to tasty muscle more efficiently; when the result made it irresistible to pack more livestock into barns, antibiotics protected animals against the likelihood of disease. Those discoveries, which began with chickens, created "what we choose to call industrialized agriculture," a poultry historian living in Georgia proudly wrote in 1971.

**Poultry** : volaille

**Broilers** :

**Heaped** = loaded, full of

**Crates** : cages

**Remote** : far away, in empty places

**Solid-walled barns** : *granges aux murs solides*

**gated slaughter plants** : *abattoirs aux grandes murailles*

**blandness** : *insipide, sans goût*

**skittish** : *maigrichon*

**muscle-bound** : *plein de muscles*