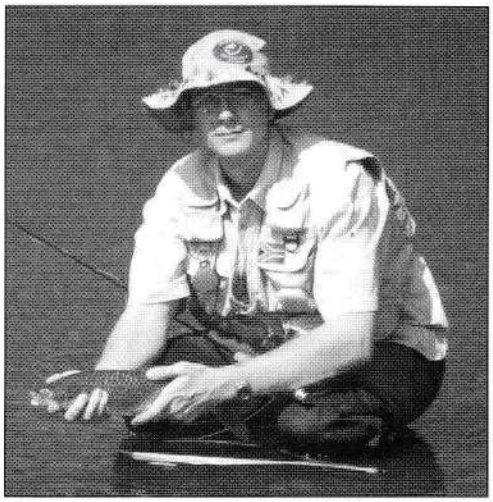
Tradition, superstition and ugly flies

by Gerhard Weldhagen

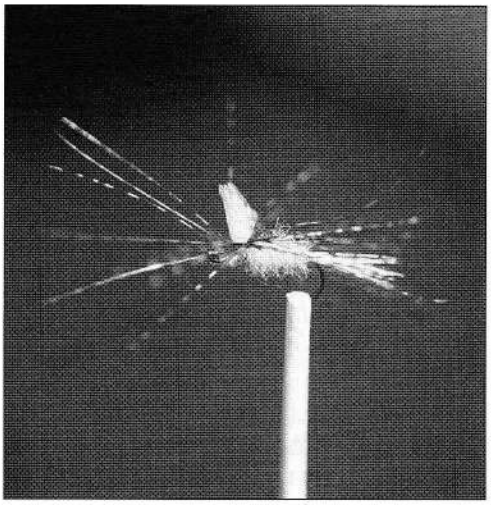
"A centuries old sport deep in ritual, lore, and passed-down know-how, flyfishing is equal parts great outdoors adventure and armchair philosophy."
The Elements of Flyfishing, Simon & Schuster Publishers, New York, 1999.

In fly-fishing, as with most things in life, there runs a strong thread of tradition, defining the roots of the sport and shaping the future to come. This is no less accurate when one thinks of fly tying, the very birthplace of mankind's deception of trout and its watery brethren. Fishing with artificial flies is certainly not a novel idea, as we can ascertain from the writings of Aelien, a naturalist of the second century AD; "*Riverside fishermen of the River Astree which flows in Macedonia, replace natural baits deemed too fragile, by a lure the hook of which is dressed with wool and feathers*". When it comes to fly tying material, certainly one of the oldest known to us is the fabled and largely mysterious coq de Leon hackles, treasured over centuries for their fish-catching abilities. As trout were highly prized as a table fish in ancient Spain, with detailed historic accounts of trout fishing pre-dating the 13th century (albeit with bait), it is not surprising that they "invented" their own type of hackle over centuries to suit local conditions.

While the first flock is thought to have been bred in a Spanish monastery ca. 1620, the first known written evidence for the existence of coq de Leon or the Leonese rooster, bred exclusively for tying artificial flies, is to be found in the Astorga manuscript (a treatise on fishing written by Juan de Bergara, ca 1624), describing 33 different fly patterns of the time. With such an ancient history and esteemed breeding it is no small wonder that the Leonese rooster became famous, if not somewhat fabled, for the prized hackles it produces for fly tying purposes. Leon, situated in northern Spain and sheltered from the sea by the Cordillera Cantabrica mountain range, is blessed with a multitude of rivers and streams originating from the high country, making it the perfect place for novel fly-fishing and fly tying ideas to develop in blissful seclusion. A sprinkling of high altitude lakes situated mostly at 1 800 - 2 000 metres above sea level further adds to the excellent fishing the region has to offer, a clear incentive for innovative ideas. While the Spanish province of Leon is regarded as a largely secluded and somewhat mysterious place, its high altitude and inaccessibility make it the perfect area for breeding Leonese roosters. However, raising cocks for fly tying purposes was not exclusively limited to Leon or Spain for that matter. The French have a long and proud tradition of raising "hackle cocks", a name that was coined by two Frenchmen, Messieurs P Verlhac and H de Monjauze, appearing for the first time in the *Chronicles of Limouzin* written in 1891 by these two gentlemen. Further evidence for the existence of hackle cocks in the Limousin area of France can be found in "*Le Pecheur*" (The Fisherman) dated April 15, 1894, advertising the excellent flies of a certain messieur Gilbert Lheritier, a tackle maker from Aubusson. The French hackle cocks have been mostly raised in areas such as the Limousin and Auvergne plateaus, while areas of Brittany, Sologne and the Pyrenees

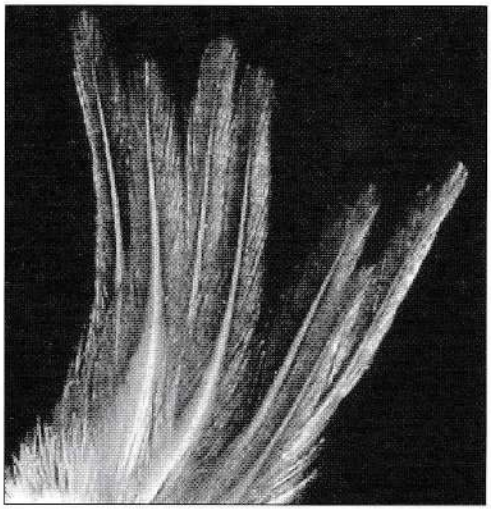


A smallmouth yellowfish taken by the author in the Vaal headwaters with a soft hackle pattern.



A parachute Adams tied with a sparse collar of coq de Leon hackle around a synthetic foam stalk.

Commercially available coq de Leon hackle bundles – note the clear classification and grading visible on the package.



Typical Indio type feathers – note the slender elongated and less spotted, smooth appearance. (Photograph kindly supplied by Paco Soria).

may also support these fowl due to the favourable climate.

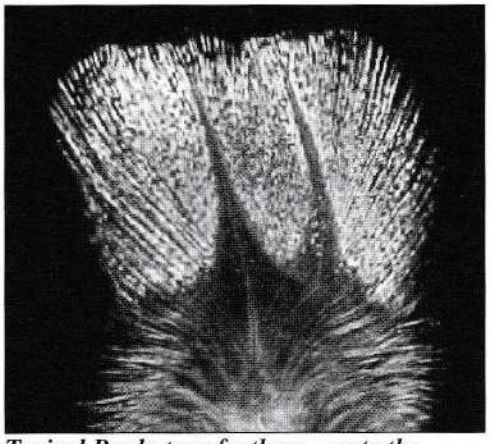
What we know today about the existence and breeding of these roosters is mainly gathered from the well-documented Spanish collective experience. Being raised free-range style at high altitudes with harsh winters and natural predation leaving only the very tough to survive, a multitude of factors lead to the special feather qualities observed. An eclectic combination of superstition, diet, genetics, minerals, environmental exposure and low-level radiation from naturally occurring uranium rich soils is believed to deliver the hackles we so treasure today. Spaniards traditionally believe that if Leonese roosters are removed

from the area they will lose their magical powers, an idea that does not sound entirely absurd once you have experienced these exceptional feathers at the end of your line!

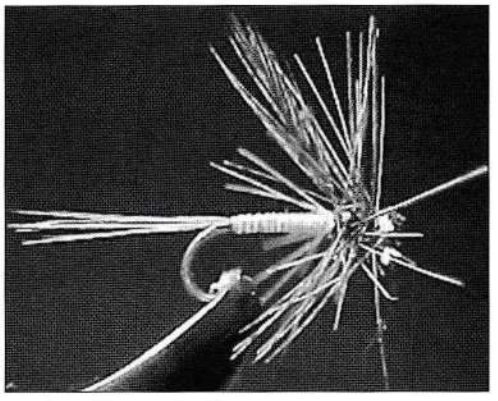
Today two basic types of Leonese roosters are to be found, namely the Pardo and Indio varieties. Phylogenetically they cannot be classified as separate strains, as there is very little uniformity among the birds of both types currently in existence. Selection and breeding have been based on feather quality, without consideration for any morphological or other factors. It has been suggested that other chicken breeds such as Leghorn, Rhode Island Red, Castilian and Andalusian have made a genetic contribution over time, although nothing can be confirmed or refuted. This certainly wasn't breeding according to classic Mendelian principles, suggesting that the genetic evolution of these chicken breeds is still in progress. Reproducibility of feather quality from "father to son", so to speak, is almost non-existent on a genetic level, making these birds almost freaks of nature. As roughly only 10% of all hatchlings will produce a good quality Leonese rooster, and with their sporadic genetic makeup, a breeder must hatch vast numbers in order to get a variety of colours. It is therefore not cost-effective to kill and skin the roosters to obtain hackles, as is the norm with other hackle-types. Traditionally hackles are plucked whole from the bird three to four times a year during the first quarter of a lunar cycle, the best quality feathers being obtained from roosters older than two years. A high quality rooster can deliver hundreds of hackles over its lifetime, making it a treasured possession and well looked after.

The following quotation from "French Fishing Flies" (Jean-Paul Pequegnot, Lyons Books 1987) illustrates this very well: "*This abstract little fly, the "X" was created by Guy Plas, the Limousin fisherman who has a great reputation throughout France for the quality of the fishing cocks he raises. This fly is one of the Ondines (Water Sprites), a series of 122 originals created by Guy Plas. An important quality of these flies is that their hackles come from the Limousin fishing cocks that Guy Plas breeds and raises with such extraordinary care. This hackle, which is very expensive, has probably never been equalled anywhere else – and I say this with full knowledge of the superb quality of top American necks. A visit to the farm of Guy Plas would be interesting for any fly tier. Each of the selected cocks is treated like a king and each has his private domain. He is allowed to live out his regal life paying only a tribute of some hackles twice a year. No lese majeste here.*" Due to these traditional harvesting methods coq de Leon hackles don't go for two-a-penny and good quality feathers are relatively difficult to obtain in South Africa.

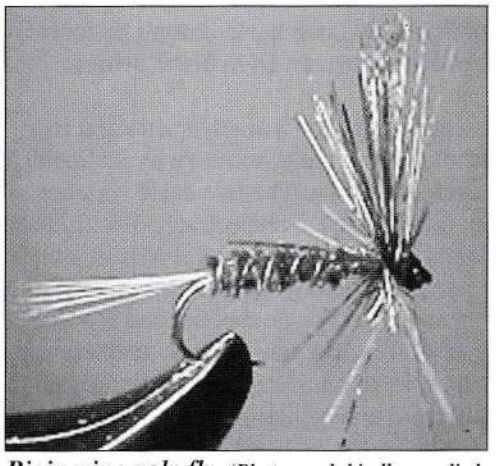
From the two types of roosters we get two lineages of feathers namely Pardo and Indio, each with its own sub-groupings. True to tradition, each variety is known by its Spanish name, which describes the characteristics of the feather type. The five basic varieties of Indio and Pardo type feathers are described in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. Briefly they consist of the browns (Pardo) and the greys (Indio). According to Darrel Martin's book *Fly-Tying Methods* (Nick Lyons Books, New York, 1987), they are then subdivided into five browns (corzuno, sarrioso, langareto, aconchado and flor de escoba) and five greys (negrisco, acerado, plateado, rubion and palometa). All other coq de Leon feathers may be regarded as variations of these ten basic types. Both hackle types are obtainable in South Africa (albeit with some legwork), usually sold in bunches of 10 – 12 feathers, all sorted and classified according to the scheme set out in Tables 1 and 2. Although several suppliers outside the traditional Spanish supply regions have entered the market, the best



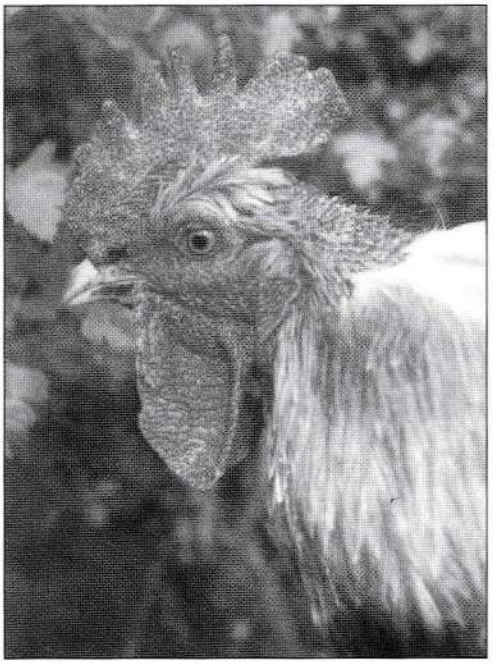
Typical Pardo type feathers – note the broad spotted appearance with stiff luminescent fibres. (Photograph kindly supplied by Paco Soria).



Little yellow ugly fly. (Photograph kindly supplied by Paco Soria).



Rioja wine ugly fly. (Photograph kindly supplied by Paco Soria).



A Pardo-type rooster before and after being plucked – from **Ephemeras** *by Charles Gaidy.*

quality hackles still originate from Spain. Some local suppliers do carry coq de Leon hackles sold on the skin, as is usually the case with other hackle types. However, these products tend to be of inferior quality compared to the traditional Spanish product. In addition these skins are sometimes not classified in the traditional way and leave the buyer bewildered as to the type and quality.

For South African fly tying purposes however, the Pardo type feathers are probably better suited as they are generally broad spades with stiff fibres and an inner speckled luminescence, making them come alive in bright sunlight. Since these feathers are relatively expensive I tend to use them sparingly, mostly in dry fly patterns such as the ugly fly. The Ugly fly, originally described by Spanish veterinarian Paco Soria, is a relatively simple pattern to tie and quite deadly on fast water. This dry fly is thought to mimic most mayfly adult stages in its country of origin, however under South African conditions trout seem to take it eagerly and with great confidence. Although the original pattern calls for cutting the hackle (Indio-type) to smaller dimensions (*http://flytyingworld.com/PagesP/ps-uglymethod.htm*), I can't bring myself to cut something so magnificent. Because I use a Pardo type feather (instead of the original Indio), I am therefore left with a really ugly, bushy fly that skitters effortlessly over brightly lit small pools and runs. So far, the fish don't seem to notice the difference!

Coq de Leon feathers truly give a lifelike appearance to emerger patterns such as the parachute Adams and Klinkhamer type flies. They can be tied in the halo-hackle style (*Piscator no 132, November 2000*) or just as a sparse collar to deceive large, educated trout locked into a hatch. During a recent trip to Donie and Juan-Marie Naudé at Vrederus Wild Trout on the Naude's Nek Pass linking Rhodes and Maclear, this was demonstrated quite clearly when several large still-water trout were deceived during the evening hatch with a coq de Leon parachute Adams. Getting the most out of a hackle sometimes means breaking new ground with material that would otherwise be discarded. The transition area between the first proper fibres (manto) and the webby flue on the hackle stem makes an excellent soft hackle pattern, quite deadly when fished with a Leisenring lift technique during a caddis hatch for smallmouth yellowfish. This fly out-fished many a pattern in clear Vaal River headwaters when the yellows start chasing hatching caddis. In addition to the few patterns mentioned, any leftover hackle fibres make fine leg substitutes on the RAB and first-rate mayfly tails. Tails of dun and spinner imitations of the micro-mayflies such as the *Baetis*, *Tricorythodes* and *Caenis* types may especially benefit from this material.

Since information about coq de Leon feathers is relatively sparse in the printed media, and possibly more so in South Africa, interested readers may gain more information about these fascinating feathers on the following websites:
http://www.flyfishinghistory.com, http://flytyingworld.com/PagesP/ps-coqdeleon.htm
http://www.gallosdeleon.com/, http://www.eflytyer.com/e_newslettersaugust2_newsletter.html.

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This article was compiled with information supplied by Paco Soria, Ed Gallop, Tom Sutcliffe, Ed Herbst and the authors of various international websites. I am indebted to them all.
Editor's note: *The awakening of interest in coq de Leon feathers in English-speaking*

countries, largely attributable, I believe, to the writing of Darrel Martin, has not gone unnoticed by he multi-million dollar hackle farming industry in the USA. Whiting Farms, for instance, has obtained breeding stock and is producing feathers that it calls coq de Leon. But, while they have a modicum of the characteristic speckling and are less expensive, they don't compare. They provide a welcome acknowledgement, however, that while the US industry has produced extraordinary hackles for tiny dry flies, it has neglected the needs of those who tie big hackle variants such as the RAB.

Table 1: Classification and varieties of Indio-type feathers

Traditional Spanish name:	Closest colour resemblance or origin of name:	Description:
Negrisco	Peacock herl	Vivid grey-black to deep lustrous black.
Acerado	Steel	Silver ash grey to steel grey.
Plateado or Perla	Pearls or silver	Pearl grey with a metallic pearl sheen on the barbs.
Rubión	Old Spanish term for red.	Red or grey – bright ginger or ruddy golden yellow.
Palometa or Avellanado	Pigeons / hazel nuts	Grey-white to dusty white.

Data compiled from Fly-Tying Methods (Darrel Martin, Nick Lyons Books, New York 1987) and http://flytyingworld.com/PagesP/ps-coqdeleon.htm.

Table 2: Classification and varieties of Pardo type feathers

Traditional Spanish name:	Closest colour resemblance or origin of name:	Description:
Corzuno	European roebuck (*Capreolus capreolus*) or fallow deer.	Dark brown and finely spotted, fine mottled marks of pale russet brown flecking against a dark background.
Langareto	Old Spanish "longo" meaning elongated.	Lighter than "corzuno" with spots, pale yellow markings aligned in an inverted "V" pattern.
Aconchado	Conch shell.	The same tone as "langareto" but with round spots, no alignment of the spots is visible.
Sarrioso	European wild goat or chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*).	Finely spotted, with a light brown background.
Flor de Escoba	Flower of *Cytisus scoparius*, legume with the common Spanish name of "Escoba".	Dark background nearly a covered with reddish brown or pale yellow burnt umber spots.

Data compiled from Fly-Tying Methods (Darrel Martin, Nick Lyons Books, New York 1987) and http://flytyingworld.com/PagesP/ps-coqdeleon.htm.