

Giving up the Joy of Live Chickens in the Era of Bird Flu

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Abstract

The taste of a freshly prepared dish of lightly-cooked chicken from alive stock, is a nutritional treat which Chinese communities all of the world partake in, whenever they get an opportunity. In this era of the avian influenza, however, caution cannot be overemphasized. In the United States of America (USA), live chickens are almost impossible to buy in the cities. The immigrant Chinese American communities have shown resilience in not partaking of this delicious dish of poached chicken because of this difficulty in obtaining live chickens. This fact may have contributed to the statistic that no human beings came down with the bird flu in the USA in 2016, let alone die from the disease. Chicken meat throughout the USA were widely sold at discounted prices during the height of the bird flu in the USA, but there was no bird-flu related fatalities. In 2016-2017 bird flu season in China, on the other hand, there has been many deaths from the bird flu. In this current work, the details for this tragic number are considered.

Keywords: *Alive; Farm-Raised; Fatalities; Transmitted*

Background

The Chinese style poached chicken, is a popular dish among Chinese people (and others) all over the world. The dish is shown in Figure 1 [1], which shows its attraction, or otherwise. That this dish is considered one where the chicken meat is lightly cooked, is evidenced by the blood that is still apparent in the cut bones, etc. It is attractive to those who savor this dish, and unattractive/unappetizing to those (especially in the USA and other western countries) who have been educated to cook white meat well.



Figure 1: *Chinese Style Poached Chicken [1].*

The various recipes for preparing the Chinese style poached chicken can be easily found on the Internet. The chicken is only slightly cooked when it is blanched in boiling water or broth. Some recipes allow time for the blanched chicken to be cooled down to room temperature, thus cooking the meat longer. Others may not allow for this additional cooking time, serving the chicken as soon as it is taken out of the boiling water, and chopped into smaller pieces.

Focus is made on this particular chicken dish because it is one of the prime suspects for transmitting the bird flu disease in this era of the bird flu.

Recent History of the Bird Flu

In the year 1997, exceedingly pathogenic bird influenza (HPAI) H5N1 was found in diseased persons in Hong Kong, China. The virus is also called 'bird flu'. The bird flu has been transmitted to many countries in Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Middle East, and, as of December, 2011, caused 573 persons to be ill [2]. Of the diseased persons, 356 have passed on [2]. Tens of millions of birds have also died or been removed to help reduce the spread of the virus. The fraction of people who perish from HPAI H5N1 is extremely large (about three-fifths).

As of this date, however, there is no recorded proof that HPAI H5N1 could mutate into a form that could spread from human to human. At the present time, human epidemics and fatalities have been a consequence of direct contact with sick birds.

Reference [3] is an update of the avian influenza H7N8 virus. In [3], it is stated that flu viruses are always altering and the current predominant LPAI H7 viruses have been known to rapidly evolve into HPAI viruses. In other words, the bird flu virus is very much viable and circulating in the USA. However, apparently, there were no human deaths from bird flu in 2016.

This, unfortunately, was not the case in China, for 2016 - 2017. In [4], it was reported that the flu season of 2016 - 2017 could be the worst in recorded history for bird-flu deaths. In January 2017, about eighty persons died from H7N9 bird flu in China [4]. This is about three times the historical average for this month in previous years. In the first week of February 2017, the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota estimated China had at least 347 bird flu cases this flu season [4], by-passing the record of 319 seen three years ago.

How do Humans get the Avian Influenza?

To a query posed, "How do humans get the bird flu?" the following response is found in [5], "Some people have caught H5N1 from cleaning or plucking the feathers of infected birds. There have been reports of infection via inhalation of aerosolized materials in live bird markets in China. It is also possible that some people were infected after swimming or bathing in water contaminated with the droppings of infected birds. In addition, some infections have occurred in people who handle fighting cocks.

People do not get the virus from consuming well cooked chicken or eggs. There have been a few cases where one infected person caught the bird flu virus from another person - but only after close personal contact. Until now, there has been no sustained human-to-human spread of H5N1."

It is the misgiving of the current author that the statement about people not catching the virus from eating well cooked chicken or eggs be taken as is, without being further examined and researched. It is a contention that the popular Chinese style poached chicken could be a transporter of the disease since on the many occasions where even though the chicken meat is fully cooked, the blood still runs from the cut bones. There is no way to ensure that the person consuming such a dish, does not also inadvertently consume some chicken blood. If the chicken is infected, it is obvious that the person can get infected with bird flu if the virus is still viable (after minimal exposure to heat). This particular way of transmitting the bird flu should be investigated thoroughly, because this dish is so popular with the Chinese communities worldwide. The benefit/cost ratio of such investigative/research projects is potentially huge since the number of Chinese communities around the world is considerable.

Containment of the Avian Influenza

In reference [6], is discussed that the bird flu virus can be carried by, and have been found in migratory birds, specifically in the migratory bar-headed geese of China. This could have been the link for the infection of domesticated birds like the chicken.

Reference [7] is a study of the bird flu in humans. The conclusion is that there is an increased risk for bird flu sickness from exposure owing to the kind of work performed by the workers, which brought the humans in proximity to the infected chickens.

Reference [8] makes for an interesting read, but may be applicable only in Java, Indonesia. In that work, it is presented that bird flu is a bio-social and bio-political issue rather than just an epidemiological issue.

In reference [9], is presented a study about person-to-person transmission of bird flu. This New England Journal of Medicine publication does conclude that the probability of such a transmission route is real.

In reference [10], is discussed a cheap, easily used testing kit which will examine a throat swap that could be used to determine bird flu infection. Use of this kit and such-like testing kits, could help immensely in containing the disease. It does not take much imagination to figure out that this kind of tool would be an effective and powerful tool in the containment of a bird flu outbreak.

Discussion and Conclusion

The January 2017 figures of human deaths from Chinese bird flu cases is too high for the second largest economy in the world. It has been reported in the mass media that the bird flu virus has not mutated since 1997. If it has, this bird flu challenge would be far greater. The closure of bird markets in affected areas of China has not been swift enough, claimed many concerned quarters. In fact, the live bird markets throughout China should be closed for one fool-proof method of disease containment.

Any reluctance by Chinese farmers, businessmen, etc. in closing the bird markets during an epidemic, is understandable because of the financial losses all around. However, this situation could be tampered or eliminated by turning the live bird markets to frozen fresh meat markets. In other words, the infected birds could be slaughtered commercially and frozen for sale throughout the county. Experience of the USA chicken market in 2016 could be positively replicated in China. Chicken meat throughout the USA were readily sold at discounted prices during the height of the bird flu in the USA.

The people should be warned about eating the popular dish, the Chinese style poached chicken and any other similar dishes. For other popular chicken dishes, e.g. roasted chicken, chicken soup, etc. there is no real necessity to start the dish with a live chicken. Frozen chickens, i.e. ones which have been killed commercially, and hygienically frozen, would not be good transporters of the disease.

Other, nutritionally good as well as delicious methods of preparing chicken, should be used instead of poaching or blanching the chicken. It is not worth the risk to partake of a traditionally popular chicken dish, because the dripping blood from the chicken bones could well keep the bird flu virus viable.

Acknowledgments

This paper is dedicated to all the peoples in the world who got sick from bird flu, especially to the ones who died.

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