

THE ARGENTE FAMILY

3: The Argente de Champagne. Its author *Peter Smith* writes:

It only seems right that I dedicate this article to Ron Credland, who passed away recently, as he was one of the principal breeders of Champagnes and helped breathe new life into them by importing stock from the Continent when the UK's gene pool was very small. He made a significant contribution to the development of the Argente Champagne and will be sadly missed.

Right: Ron Credland at Bradford 2010 where with his partner Mike Cox they achieved best of breeds in three fur sections: Silver Fox, Alaska and Argente



Argente de Champagne

History

The Argente de Champagne is one of the oldest breeds in the world. Its origins, as far as I can establish, go back to France, where I understand it can be found in the wild. It was imported into the UK in the early 1900's and was the basis for the formation of the National Argente Club in 1920s.

As a result of the unique colouring properties of the Argente, it found almost instant popularity. Firstly, as it was a large rabbit, it had a good commercial value and would provide a decent meal in the First World War. Secondly, the pelts were also very desirable.

I am advised that at some of the large shows in the early 20th Century, classes of fifty or sixty Champagnes were common. However, as time went on, other colours of Argente developed and became popular, particularly the Creme and Bleu – with the Champagne slipping back in numbers.

My first recollections of Champagnes, passed on from father, were those of the 1950s, 60s and early 70s of Linworth Stud, Jack Mills and Bill Joiner. These were big thickset rabbits, with good open flowing coats. In particular, the Champagnes of Linworth Stud had a number of BIS at well supported stock shows.

However, those that seemed to be used to set up new breeders always emanated from Jack Mills.

The main recipient of these, after Jack's death, was Bill Stewart who had a good degree of success with them, but this eventually petered out as his work commitments took over.

At the risk of the Champagne dying out, we took some of Bill's stock and shortly thereafter Ron Credland appeared on the scene, with stock that had descended from Tom Such's strain in Lincolnshire.

Desperate for an out cross, Ron took some stock from ourselves and started to breed some decent Champagnes again. However, it was not long before Ron suffered inbreeding problems again and needed more new blood. He looked to the Continent from where the Champagne originated.

As a result of this we have Champagnes at present that are extremely fit with bold and upstanding type so typical of Continental stock. They are generally of sound type and good colour, although many I have seen on the

Continent are very dark on the smellers, which is a fault in the UK.

It would be fair to say that the coats, in particular texture and flow, require a little more work, but a ready supply of good stock in the Netherlands, France and Germany means that there is the ability to bring some excellent specimens back to the UK.

As youngsters, the Champagne, like all Argentes is born a self-colour, black in this instance. The silvering process once again differs for each rabbit.

Again, I have found with the Champagnes that the silvering process seems to come in two stages. The first is one whereby almost an intermediate coat comes through, that is halfway between the fully silvered adult coat and the selfcolouring. At this stage the rabbit is far too dark and not ready to show.

Once this coat is shed, the change occurs fairly soon after this intermediate coat and the full adult coat comes. Therefore, only the faster coated developers make youngsters. However, this adult coat does, unlike the Bleus, tend to stick around for some time. I know that Ron Credland showed a buck almost continuously for 12 months without it breaking coat – it picked up over 50 stars in the process.

So the longevity of the Champagne's show life makes it an attractive proposition – as many fur rabbits don't show beyond 7 to 8 months in age. This is clearly due to the influence from the Continent.

Type

In view of the influx of Continental Champagnes towards the end of the 1990s, the weight for the Champagne was changed to be between 9 to 12 pounds. This reverts the standard back to the level that it was many years ago in the 1930's and 1940's.

During the 1970's and 80's the common criticism of Champagnes was that they had lost their size compared with those of yesteryears. That criticism can no longer be levied as the current crop have good size and bold upstanding type.

Many of those that did have the size in times gone by, often had the type of a sack of potatoes, so this good size, type and an excellent degree of fitness makes for an appealing looking rabbit.

Coat

The coat of the Champagne is different to that of the other Argentes. It is longer and should be more open and loose in its flow, as opposed to lying close and tight to the body.

The secret to having this open flow is the length of the coat. The standard states that the length should be between an inch and quarter and an inch and three-eighths. My view is that in order to get the desirable effect, it should be at the upper end of that range, in order to allow it to wash over the top of your fingers as you put your hand through the coat.

Whilst length is important in obtaining the right coat, equally so are density and texture. A flowing silkiness to the coat is imperative, as is the density that gives the coat its resistance and feel.

Some of the Continental imports are very harsh in coat and lack the flow that, in my mind, is required of a good Champagne's coat. So texture is very important to consider when buying stock from overseas and breeding from them.

Colour

As I stated earlier, the Champagne often gets an intermediate coat. Therefore, even at this stage it may be difficult to assess colour. However, I would add that good coloured parents do tend to breed true.

A useful starter from my experience to assess colour is to look at the tips of the toes, if these remain darker than the desired shade when the adult coat is coming through, then it is unlikely that the body colour will be correct.

Once the adult coat is through, the top colour should have an old silver effect. This is obtained by having the silver top colour evenly and moderately interspersed with longer black guard hairs (ticking). The ticking should be even across the entire rabbit in order to give the desired effect.

It is rare that you find Champagnes that are too light in top colour, it is usually the other extreme, darkness, that occurs. This is largely caused by the ticking being too heavy and thereby giving a dull dark effect as opposed to the old silver shine. The muzzle and ears again suffer as a result of this and the evenness of the colour may be detracted.

As the adult coat comes through, so the undercolour of the previously self-black rabbit changes. This dilutes to a slate blue. As with all Argentes, this should extend as far down the hair shaft to the skin as possible, without a white band at the base. The undercolour should be one shade throughout. However, due to the change from dark slate to silver at the tip of the hair shaft there may be a darker band across the top of the undercolour.

Champagnes have never had any problems with white toenails – but for the sake of completeness it is worth a look.

Show preparation

The Champagne does require some patience in awaiting its arrival at the show bench. As a result of the often slower silvering process, it is not until the age of 5 or 6 months that it may make its debut. However, once it is on the show scene, they have much more show longevity about them than the other colours.

As with all rabbits, the Champagne should be fit and in good condition when it hits the show bench. This does not seem to be a problem with the present crop, as fitness is second to none and they are shown in very hard condition.

As I stated in my article regarding the Bleu, the coat should sparkle and an old silver shine be immediately apparent. Again, skilled grooming and preparation come to the fore.

It is fair to say that Champagnes have had a reputation for being grubby when it comes to cleanliness; I remember many a comment regarding Jack Mills' rabbits, which on occasion he would be asked if the rabbit had

walked to the show. As I stated in my article about Bleus – witchhazel on cotton wool seems to do the trick with Argentes.

The future

Despite plenty of stock being available on the Continent and imported into the UK from Holland and Germany in recent years, the Champagne remains in too few hands.

However, in recent months I am aware that further stock has been imported and I hope that these will be seen around the shows in the future. I have always had a soft spot for Champagnes, they are, in my view, the King of the Argente family.

A rabbit with a wonderful temperament and they should be capable of top show honours. Hopefully the future should be rosier for them.

To be continued

