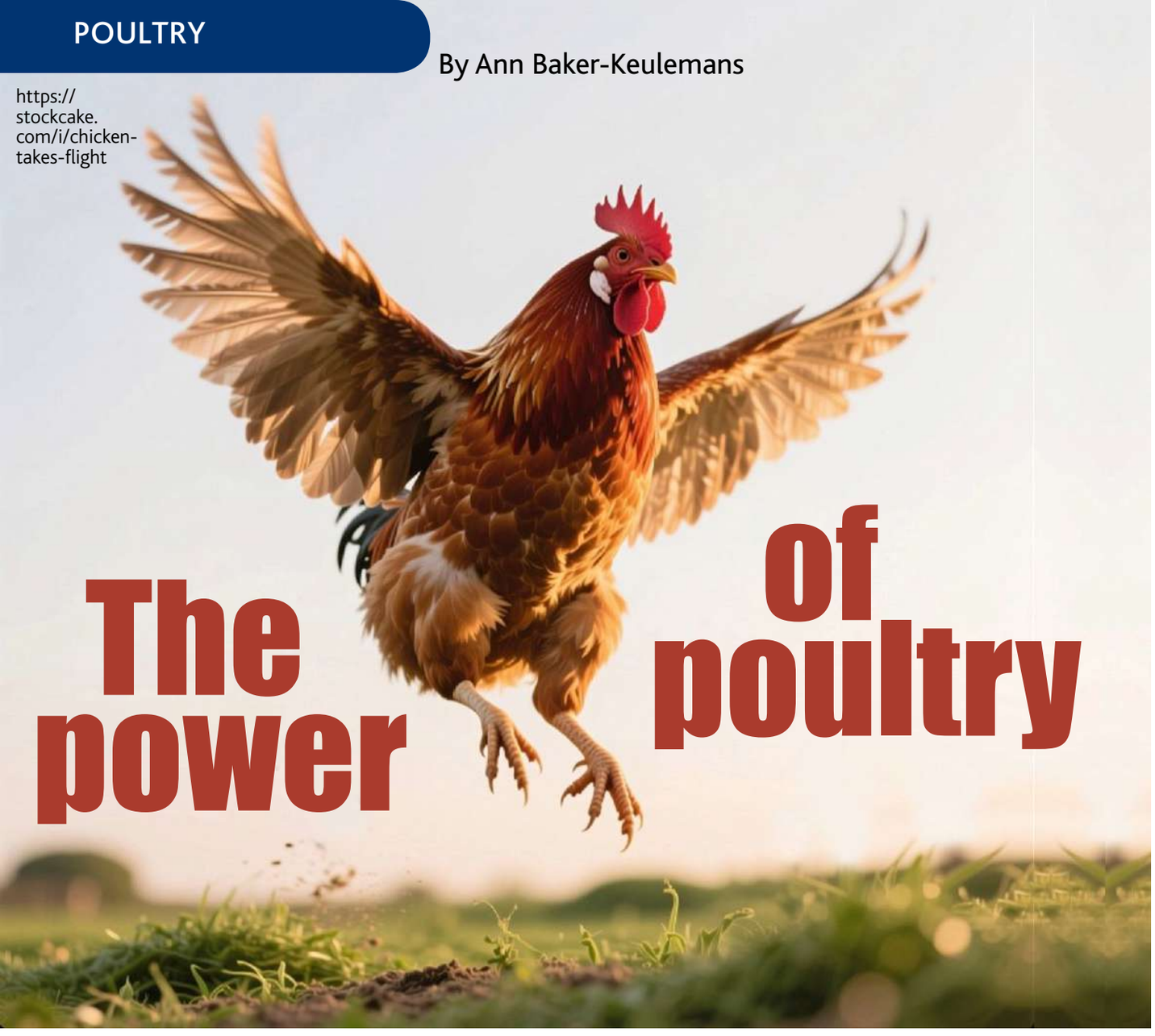
By Ann Baker-Keulemans



https://stockcake.com/i/chicken-takes-flight

The power of poultry

Poultry plays a vital role in the lives of South African consumers. South Africans consume more chicken than any other meat, poultry producers provide twice as much meat as the beef industry and an estimated 23 million chickens are consumed each week. Poultry feeds the nation and is the country's most affordable and most popular meat protein.

Market conditions improve nationally

Pieter Louw

Despite ongoing infrastructure challenges, tricky climate conditions and a devastating bird flu outbreak, the South African poultry industry remains resilient. In Rainbow Chicken's Integrated Annual Report published in September 2026, Pieter Louw, Chairman, says, "The South African chicken industry entered the 2026 financial year with improving fundamentals. Feed-cost relief, as a result of strong local maize and soybean crops and ample global supply, provided some support to producer margins after a prolonged period of high costs. This is important in our sector, where feed remains the largest cost component and profitability is highly sensitive to movements in commodity prices, currency exchange rates, energy costs, logistics and other administrative costs."

Louw adds, "Rainbow is building a stronger, more competitive poultry business by combining operational excellence, disciplined investment and responsible growth, while contributing to South Africa's food security, employment and agricultural development. Rainbow's ambition is clear: to be South Africa's market-leading, best-in-class and low-cost chicken producer, delivering sustainable value to all stakeholders."

Marthinus Stander

Rainbow appears to be on the right track as their annual report puts their revenue at R17.1 billion rand (up 7.7%). Marthinus Stander, Rainbow's CEO, says, "We are ready to start shifting from recovery to reimagining what the business can become. The next stage, 'Rainbow 2.0', targets growth, innovation and further value extraction while keeping the business profitable throughout the cycle."

Meanwhile Astral Foods poultry division reported a staggering financial turnaround in its latest interim financial results for the six months ended 31 March 2026. Underpinned by a softening in poultry feed costs (mainly corn) and strong consumer demand, the JSE-listed integrated poultry producer marked its 25th anniversary on the stock exchange with a massive surge in overall profitability, reporting revenue growth of 14% to R10.1 billion and a swing from an operating loss of R26 million to an operating profit of R848 million. Lower feed costs, stronger demand, improved selling prices and better production efficiencies were important drivers.

Serves: 4
Preparation time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 30 minutes

INGREDIENTS

400g sweet potatoes, cubed
2 cloves garlic, crushed
1 tsp (5ml) cumin seeds
$^1/_2$ tsp (2.5ml) coriander seeds
30g butter, melted
400g butter beans
3 Tbsp (45ml) milk
150g County Fair product of choice **(Strips, Breast Steaks or Nuggets)**
50g peas, defrosted
a handful of fresh coriander, chopped

CHICKEN NUGGETS
WITH SWEET POTATO MASH

This recipe may look simple, but it's packed with flavour. And it's budget-friendly too.

Method:

Preheat the oven to 200°C.

Place the sweet potatoes, garlic, cumin, coriander, and butter on a baking tray and toss to combine. Roast for 20 minutes, or until the sweet potatoes are tender.

Place the roasted sweet potatoes in a blender and blitz.

Add the beans and milk, and continue blending until smooth.

Place your County Fair product of choice – **Strips, Breast Steaks or Nuggets** – on a baking sheet and bake according to the pack instructions until cooked through and golden brown.

Serve the sweet potato mash with the chicken nuggets, peas, and fresh coriander.

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The Poultry Master Plan ushers in success

In 2019 South Africa's Poultry Sector Master Plan was signed as an agreement between government, the poultry industry and organised labour. It aimed to grow the industry, create jobs, optimise the value chain and build a successful, sustainable market.

Natalie Kinsley

In her Food & Agribusiness article titled South African poultry industry reports strong growth under masterplan, Natalie Kinsley says, "The sector has recorded broader growth since the launch of the Poultry Masterplan, with more than R2.1 billion invested across the industry between 2019 and 2025. Over the same period, poultry production increased by 26%, rising from 19.7 million to 23 million birds slaughtered per week. Industry stakeholders said this reflects improved efficiency and expanded capacity across the value chain."

According to Kinsley, the South African poultry sector reported significant investment growth and production gains under the Poultry Masterplan following the first Economic Oversight Committee (EOC) meeting between the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC), the Department of Agriculture, and industry stakeholders.

Kinsley notes, "32 project leaders were recognised for establishing large-scale poultry operations, each with an average investment of around R45 million."

South Africa's poultry sector has recorded growth under the Poultry Masterplan, with more than R2.1 billion (about US$126 million) invested across the industry between 2019 and 2025. Image created with the help of AI (Reve), https://www.foodagribusiness.world/

20 broiler contract farmers were also recognised, as well as three new hatcheries and eight egg-laying projects. According to industry figures presented at the meeting, these projects have achieved a 100% reported success rate, with total investment exceeding R1 billion.

The poultry sector is South Africa's largest agricultural industry, valued at around R74 billion, supporting more than 110 000 jobs across the value chain. These initial accomplishments mean that the poultry industry is not only no longer in distress, it is a growing sector able to deliver affordable protein to local consumers while also being considered globally competitive.

Local success drives export goals

The Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy's 2025 Competitiveness Benchmark Report, compiled in collaboration with Wageningen University in the Netherlands, found that South Africa is now the second most competitive poultry producer globally, using less feed to produce a kilogram of chicken than most of its international counterparts. South African producers achieved the lowest feed conversion ratio among major producing nations, including the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, the United States and Brazil. IOL and Nova News both reported that while feed remains the biggest cost, South Africa's position as one of the most tech-

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nically efficient poultry producers in the world is a direct result of recent investments in the industry.

Izaak Breitenbach

In an Engineering News article, Izaak Breitenbach, CEO of the SA Poultry Association (SAPA), says, "With the national poultry industry having grown to meet domestic demand including significant import replacement, the next logical step is to transition to exports."

With limited import replacement opportunities available locally – South Africa's biggest poultry import is mechanically deboned meat (MDM) for products such as viennas and polony, as local producers do not have the deboning facilities – exports are the next logical step for growing the industry.

"Pertinent export opportunities being pursued in the poultry industry include exporting cooked chicken products to markets with high-income households in Europe, the UK and the United Arab Emirates – particularly Saudi Arabia," writes Creamer Media's Marleny Arnoldi. South African producers were simply not able to produce these types of exports 10 years ago, but that has changed.

Breitenbach says it will take time for markets to open up for South African exports, but SAPA has begun taking the necessary steps. "We have submitted all the documentation needed for cooked exports to those regions. We are awaiting inspections by those countries to approve our exports. Should we get approval, there is a further process to prove there are no antibiotics in our chicken before the physical market opens up for us."

China is expanding its poultry exports to Kazakhstan and Russia, with competitive prices challenging established suppliers. Koos Groenewold, www.foodagribusiness.world/

Rainbow Chicken welcomes the export drive, as Louw explains, "Export development remains a key opportunity, but depends on disease control systems, veterinary certification, market access negotiations and reliable logistics. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is creating new opportunities for intra-African trade by reducing barriers and improving market access across the continent. The agreement presents an opportunity for us to participate in a more integrated regional economy, while building long-term trade relationships in high-growth markets. Evolving global trade dynamics also reinforce the importance of diversification.

"Expanding into multiple markets will help build resilience while reducing dependence on any single region or trading framework. Rainbow is expanding its systems, expertise and operational capabilities to compete effectively in international markets, including Africa, while protecting the integrity of its supply chain," explains Louw.

The benefits of opening up these export markets wouldn't necessarily offset vulnerabilities around feed cost, disease management and supply chain challenges, but it will certainly help to bolster the industry by diversifying the countries it exports to and potentially increasing the industry's direct employment from 56 000 to 70 000 people.

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CHICKEN, CHORIZO AND BEAN STEW

A hearty meal packed with bold smoky and spicy flavours.

Serves: 4
Preparation time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 1h:15 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- Glug of olive oil
- 6-8 chicken thighs and/or drumsticks
- Salt and milled pepper
- ½ coil (150g) chorizo, sliced
- 4-5 baby onions, halved
- 3-4 garlic cloves, sliced
- 2 Tbsp (30ml) smoked or regular paprika
- 2 Tbsp (30ml) butter
- Handful of fresh basil, stalks removed
- 2 cups (500ml) chicken stock
- 1 cup (250ml) fresh cream
- 1 can (400g) butter beans, drained
- 1 can (400g) red kidney beans, drained
- 1 lime

Method:

Preheat the oven to 200°C.

Heat the oil in a large ovenproof dish fitted with a lid.

Season the chicken with salt and pepper and toss it together with olive oil.

Brown the chicken evenly in batches for about 4-5 minutes each. Remove from the pan.

Add the chorizo and fry for 3-5 minutes or until crispy. Remove from the heat.

Lower the heat slightly and fry the onions for 6-8 minutes.

Add the garlic, paprika, butter and basil and fry for 2-3 minutes.

Add the chicken and chorizo back to the pan, along with the chicken stock. Cover and bake in the oven for about 20-30 minutes.

Add the cream, butter beans, and red kidney beans, and return to the oven for an additional 10-12 minutes.

Remove from the oven, then add a squeeze of lime juice and season to taste if needed.

Serve with crusty bread, buttery mash or a side salad.

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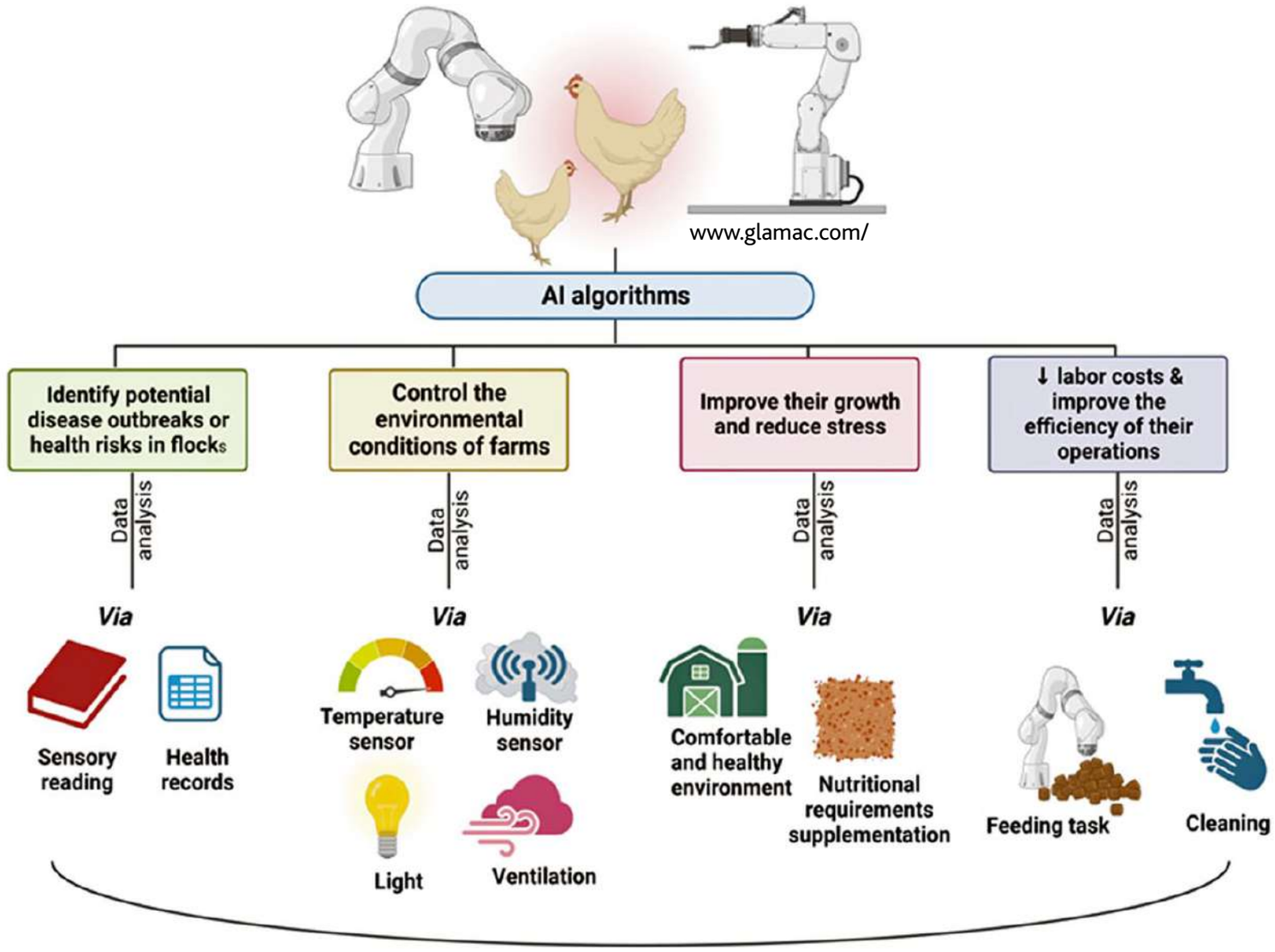
AI and agriculture

Machine learning, data analytics and automation are driving the optimisation of the local poultry industry. From managing feed per individual bird and monitoring health to automated environmental controls and enhanced decision making, technology is making a massive difference to the way producers do business.

Animal nutrition and healthcare specialists Natural Remedies posted a blog in April 2025 saying, "The application of AI spans across various aspects of poultry farming, including breeding, feeding, disease management, environmental monitoring and operational efficiency. By leveraging AI, poultry farmers can make data-driven decisions that improve the health of their flocks, reduce resource consumption, and increase overall productivity."

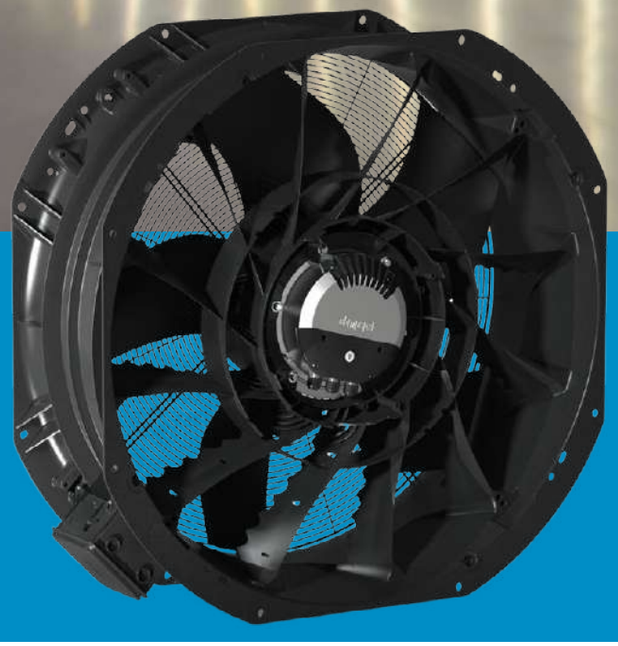
Danish company SKOV A/S is an industry leader in the development and manufacture of livestock house ventilation systems, climate control solutions and farm management software for animal production. Their poultry farm management system, FarmOnline+, offers an easy-to-use, intuitive overview of performance and conditions across houses and locations, all accessible from a dashboard on your smartphone or PC. Remote access allows for continuous monitoring and real-time data across houses and sites, allowing the user to improve consistency, and make changes from wherever they are.

It's the system used by Oscar Ntuli, farm manager at Grootspruit Phetogo broiler farm near Bronkhorstspruit, which produces around 360 000 birds per cycle, and is one of the reasons the farm is a commercial success story.



Natural Remedies notes that the biggest benefits of adopting AI in the poultry industry include enhanced disease detection and management, optimised growth rates, improved egg production, automation of routine tasks, and environmental monitoring and sustainability. Continuous monitoring of both stock and environment, automated data analytics using AI and the optimisation of certain variables leads to healthier animals, improved operations, enhanced quality, and increased profitability.

In the April/May 2026 issue of SAPA's Poultry Bulletin, Izaak Breitenbach, who is also the Broiler Organisation's CEO, shared some of the highlights of the International Poultry Council's (IPC) annual meeting held in Atlanta, USA. "There was strong and consistent emphasis on artificial intelligence, both in poultry production and in highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) surveillance, preparedness and management. The adoption of AI is clearly accelerating across disease surveillance, but also in production optimisation, financial services and crisis management. The local poultry industry must strategically position itself to benefit from these developments."



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An updated approach to bird flu

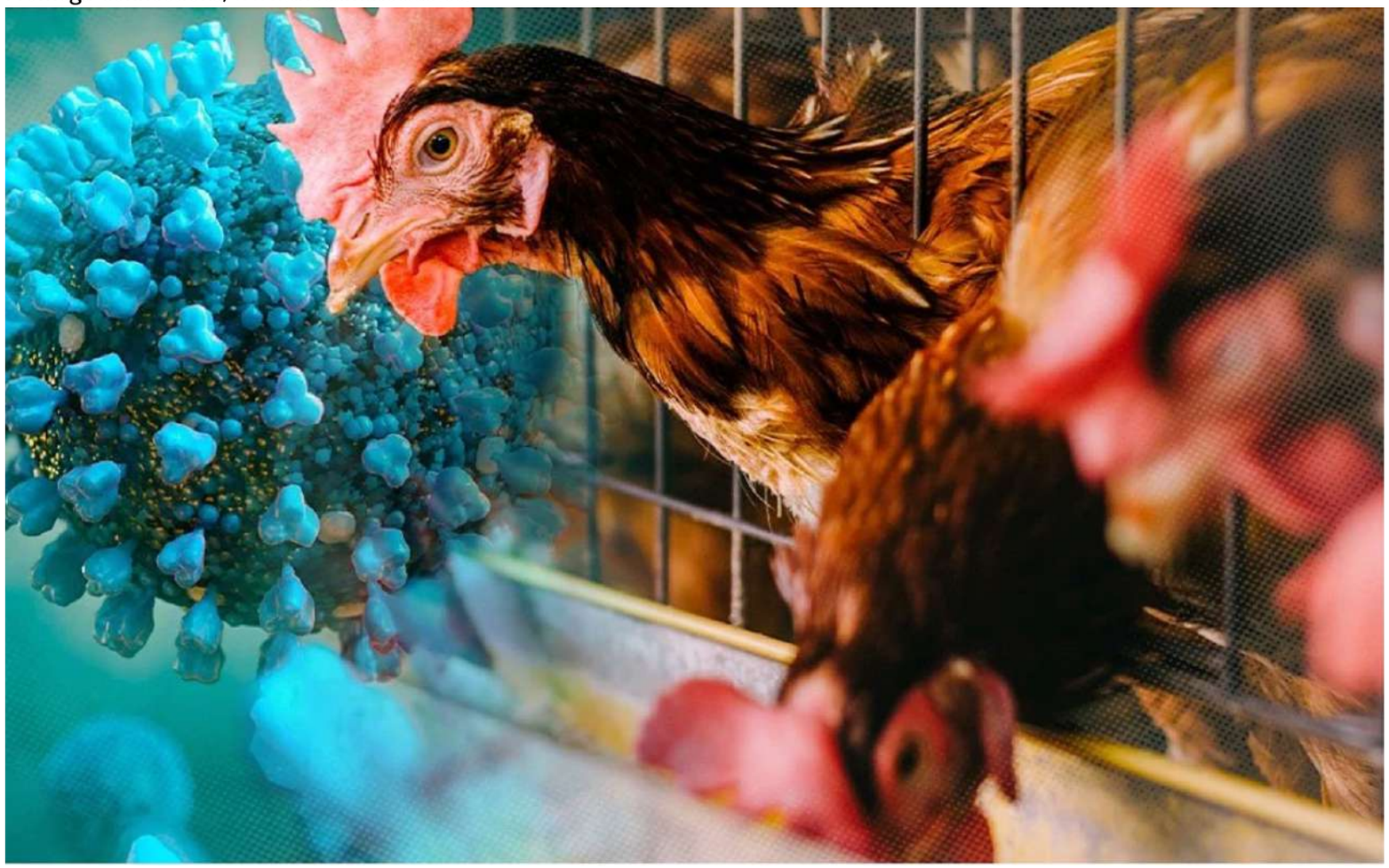
There's no denying that bird flu has had a detrimental effect on commercial poultry production at a global level, and it has had a brutal effect on the local market as well. Traditional management for HPAI outbreaks mandated mass culling of both infected and uninfected birds, resulting in devastating financial losses as well as a drop in supply and a resulting increase in prices.

Although former Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen, had taken steps to amend the Animal Diseases Regulations (R.2026 of 1986) to permit the use of vaccinations against HPAI in the country, this policy is currently at a standstill and has not yet been fully implemented under Minister Willie Aucamp, who took over this position on 30 June 2026.

The revised formal regulatory framework and guidelines promised under Steenhuisen have experienced persistent bureaucratic delays and have not yet been published for wide industry use. Mass vaccination remains restricted because current protocols and requirements are viewed by the industry as too complex and costly, leaving large-scale implementation stalled outside of isolated pilot applications.

Without a mass vaccination rollout, the industry remains vulnerable to multi-billion rand losses if another severe wave hits. In addition, because vaccination protocols are complex and expensive, flock numbers cannot be proactively protected. Should a major outbreak occur during the delay, the resulting sudden shortages of table eggs and broiler chicken will likely drive up prices for consumers.

Promega Connections, www.theclimateclub.co/



In July 2026, Izaak Breitenbach noted that HPAI vaccination of poultry is permitted in the country, but it requires official authorisation and stringent monitoring). With restrictive rules and high costs, only Astral Foods had, at that stage, been granted authorisation to vaccinate – and only on one of its farms.

Breitenbach called on the government to provide the same level of support to the poultry sector as it does to the beef industry. "The time for action to expand HPAI vaccination is now because of the time lag between the start of vaccination and its full efficacy. For the egg industry, vaccination will not take a significant effect until 70% of the nation's 35 million laying hens have received their doses."

However, by September 2026, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) published guidelines for Novel Influenza A Virus Infections of Zoonotic Origin, which noted that South Africa has only "progressively implemented a risk-based avian influenza vaccination strategy" under controlled veterinary oversight, confirming that vaccination remains treated purely as a localised, supplementary measure rather than a finalised mass-market rollout.

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Poultry menu trends

Chicken is undeniably the most versatile and widely consumed protein in the country. Despite rising costs, it remains a staple for many consumers, but how they consume that protein is shifting. Size, format, weight and how it performs under various cooking styles all inform purchase decisions. Are customers prioritising affordability? Are they looking for convenience? Do they want to branch out and try unusual cuts for traditional dishes? Thighs, wings and feet are more in demand than ever, and bone-in meat remains popular.

Retailers and wholesalers need to stay abreast of evolving consumer requirements, particularly around convenience and meal formats. Frozen portions, particularly those that have been re-seasoned, marinated or crumbed are quick and convenient – and fast becoming a whole meal solution.

Partially processed meats are fresh meats that are crumbed, pre-marinated or prepared in such a way that removes some of the labour and variability involved in meal prep but still offers the buyer convenience and flexibility to make the dish their own. Many consumers are demanding quality and convenience in the same product, making upscaled convenience a must.

Air fryer-friendly poultry products are increasingly popular, as are poultry options for snacking, children's meals and casual dining. Both Sovereign Foods and Rainbow Chicken reacted to changing consumer needs by launching crumbed chicken products with hidden vegetables to appeal to parents looking for healthier alternatives for their children.

Innovation and value-added products in the poultry category are driving growth with snack platters, mini pies and spring rolls, filled bao buns and other ready-to-cook or heat-and-eat products, but hardbody chickens are also a growth driver. End-of-lay hens are better suited for lengthy cooking times and dishes specific to certain traditions and communities, proving innovation isn't just about convenience and partially processed products. Understanding how your value-add products appeal to your customer base is the first step in creating a destination shopping experience.

Free range poultry and eggs remain a hot topic for consumers and retailers. The cost associated with these products is often mitigated by the consumer's demand for humane, ethical and environmentally friendly products, and their willingness to pay for such.

Information from Poultry Bulleting October/November 2026
Astral_Early Bird SR 2026-10

As imports make up around 30% of the poultry products in South Africa, importers such as the EU and Brazil can sell chicken for a lower cost than local producers can. Low-income South Africans, who are price-sensitive, may choose to buy the cheaper imported chicken. This can cause small-scale and local farmers to go out of business. Many of the farms are located in rural South Africa. As a result, people can lose their employment and some communities will lose their source of protein. www.borgenmagazine.com/

Opportunities in poultry: a positive outlook

As far as the Poultry Master Plan is concerned, the poultry industry is currently transitioning into the second phase. Whereas the emphasis was on post-crisis stabilisation and increased investment, the industry is now focusing on scaling production, expanding cooked meat exports, growing transformation and reducing reliance on foreign imports.

Cost and affordability remain a massive concern for most consumers, and the industry is at risk of adverse environmental conditions, disease and infrastructure challenges. But there's a sense of determination among producers, a willingness to forge ahead, hold the industry up and keep on building on what they have already achieved.

For retailers and wholesalers, supporting local producers and suppliers is the best way to ensure a robust, sustainable poultry industry for the future. **SR**

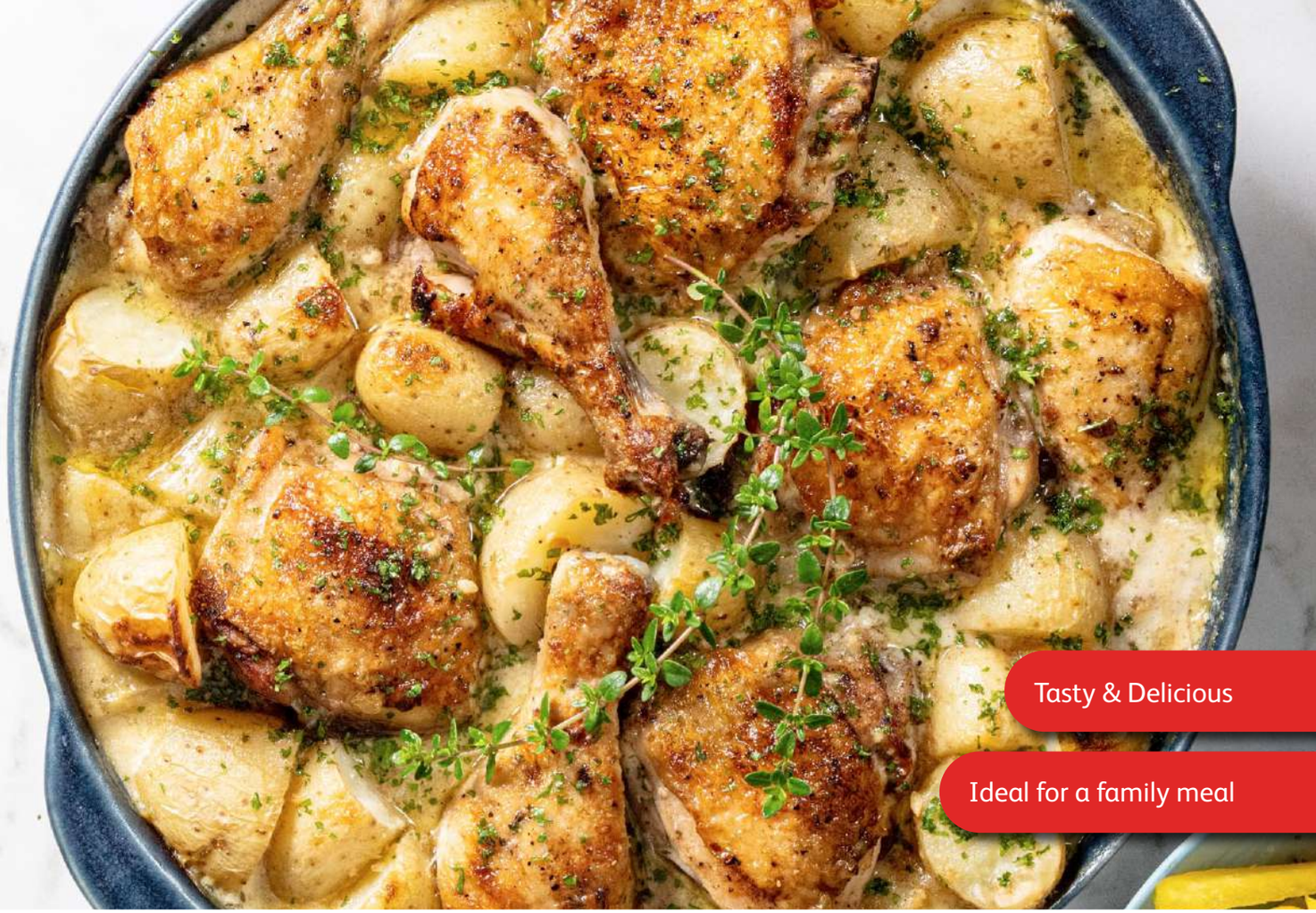
Other sources:
www.dailymaverick.co.za/ | www.wattagnet.com/

Ann Baker-Keulemans writes on topics related to business, lifestyle, technology, and health, with extensive knowledge on the SA retail and wholesale landscape. Contact annbk@wilkinsross.co.za www.wilkinsrossglobal.com

Serves: 4
Preparation time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: 45 minutes

INGREDIENTS

4 chicken drumsticks
4 chicken thighs
500g baby potatoes, halved
4 Tbsp (60ml) butter
6 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1/2 tsp (2.5ml) thyme leaves, plus extra stalks
1 Tbsp (15ml) flour
1 cup (250ml) chicken stock
1/2 cup (125ml) cream
1/2 cup (125ml) parmesan cheese
salt and pepper
fresh cabbage slaw
2 Tbsp (30ml) parsley, chopped



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CHICKEN AND POTATOES WITH GARLIC PARMESAN SAUCE

Double up this recipe to serve a hungry horde.

Method:

Preheat the oven to 180˚C.

Season the chicken generously with salt and pepper. Put half the butter into a skillet over a medium-high heat.
Add the chicken pieces and sear until golden brown on both sides (about 2 minutes per side). Put the chicken aside.

Turn the heat on the skillet to low.

Add the remaining butter, garlic, and thyme leaves. Sauté gently for 2 minutes. Add the flour and cook for a further 2 minutes.
Gradually add the chicken stock, whisking continuously to remove any lumps. Bring to the boil; then add the cream and parmesan cheese. Whisk together.

Place the chicken pieces skin-side up in a roasting dish. Arrange the potatoes around the chicken. Pour the cream sauce over and scatter the extra thyme stalks on top.

Place the chicken pieces in the oven and cook for about 45 minutes, or until they are cooked through.
Sprinkle over chopped parsley.

Serve the creamy chicken in its roasting dish, accompanied by the potatoes, and garnished with the cabbage slaw on the side.

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