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### **Ostrich — It's What's for Dinner?**

**By Julie Sturgeon**

Ostrich meat may be good for us, but can it fly in America? Marketers scramble against all odds to answer with a resounding, "Yes!"

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Chef Hubert Schmieder has been on the cutting edge of the American food industry three times since immigrating from Poland to the United States in 1956: He worked on a 600,000 chicken farm in Pennsylvania that figured out how to put yolks in a milk carton for fast-food scrambled eggs. He was the guy who turned turkey into pastrami, salami and hot dogs for Bil Mar Foods. Today he serves as ambassador for the American Ostrich Association, jetting about the country demonstrating how to prepare the newest fad meat to hit our plates.

He stands at state fair booths and fancy catering exhibitions, grocery store aisles and the kitchens of fine restaurants, dabbing smoked "Ostrich sausage" bits onto crackers, stir-frying ostrich meat to serve over rice, grilling ostrich steaks to accompany the inevitable baked potato — even barbecuing the red meat and slapping it between hamburger buns. Schmieder estimates he's shoved his spoonful of ostrich into the mouths of more than 25,000 curious people — he totes the snapshots in his briefcase stuffed with ostrich anatomy charts to prove it.

"We chefs know there is a great need for more food for this whole earth," he says fervently, his lilting European accent still thick. "The population explodes everywhere, so I'm always thinking, 'What else could we raise?'" When a student from Evansville, Indiana, approached Schmieder — who doubles as a chef/instructor at the Restaurant, Hotel Institutional and Tourism Management at Purdue University when not globetrotting with ostrich recipes and promotional silverware pins in his pockets — to help his family puzzle out how to butcher ostriches, the chef had an answer to his own musing.

"The ostrich needs pioneers who go out and spread the message. That is me," he says humbly.

But there's a drawback: Shoppers can't pick up a slab wrapped neatly in cellophane and sandwiched between the beef skirts and boneless chicken breasts at the A&P on the way home. Although the AOA estimates between 350,000 and 500,000 ostriches currently are growing up in the United States bound for the butcher's knife, that number is merely a good start on breeding stock, Schmieder admits. After all, the country boasts 200,000 million laying hens — almost one hen per person — to keep us in eggs, even in today's cholesterol-fearing nation. *The Economist* predicted back in 1995 that we'd have to slaughter 80,000 birds a week just to gain 1 percent of the American meat market.

The second hurdle: Ostrich meat isn't new. These birds were roaming the earth with Solomon's contemporaries, and while ancient texts don't exactly detail recipes among the two-liner Proverbs, starving people have always never been too picky as to which animal they chew on. The ostrich continued running around Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran areas of the world (although today it's native exclusively to South African countries) and was hunted to near extinction at one point. The first formal ostrich farms were established in South Africa, in the Karoo and Eastern Cape, in 1863 — the United States, having a civil war on its hands, no doubt paid scant attention. Over the next two decades, the South Africans generously shared their new-found meat in North and South America, India and Australia — until in 1881 their government nixed giving away a world market domination for nothing. The consequent export duties on the birds and their eggs squelched the sharing.

Meanwhile, ostrich decorated many a dish there and later in Europe's gourmet restaurants. Then when South Africa deregulated its \$70-million-a-year industry in 1994, Americans decided the situation could be akin to a good pot roast — simmering to a tasty flavor while the lid is on — and began taking a stab at raising the flightless birds on our shores. In reality, these mavericks had a market looking for a demand, not vice versa.

Nevertheless, men like Schmieder and Bruce McLoughlin — co-owner of Global Ostrich Inc. in Dublin, Ohio, who traveled to South Africa personally to select its South African Black bloodlines — are high on the

possibilities. A beef-like taste and texture is the first advantage. “I spent three days in a Texas supermarket in 1995 and was surprised at the number of housewives and children who were willing to taste ostrich,” Schmieder says. “The kids in particular were not upset.”

Ostrich farmers have the second drawing card down cold, muttering the nutritional statistics almost unconsciously: it’s very lean, with only 2 to 4 grams of fat and 120 to 130 calories in a 100-gram cooked serving. Better yet, says the AOA, each bird averages a feed-to-meat conversion of 50 percent, compared to a cow’s 20 percent. Ranchers also are excited that each bird yields approximately 90 pounds of meat to be turned into meals.

And, yes, upper-crust restaurants like CN Tower’s 360 Revolving Restaurant in Toronto, Ontario; Rogue’s Manor in Eureka Springs, Arkansas; The Beverly Hills Hotel Polo Grill & Polo Lounge in Beverly Hills; D.J.’s Steakhouse in Pueblo, Colorado; and L’economie in New Orleans feature ostrich regularly on their menus. Among the fancier ways to prepare it: Marinate the ostrich in soy sauce mixed with garlic, ginger, pepper and oil for two hours; sear it; then pour a chicken stock demi-glaze over the top.

The party crowd grabs ground ostrich, cream cheese, Parmesan cheese, chopped onion and parsley, and those cans of crescent dinner rolls to create ostrich appetizer crescents. Family cooks stir ground ostrich with olive oil, onions, chili powder, ground cumin, dried oregano, coriander and ground cinnamon for a kick-butt chorizo (that’s sausage for those diners who prefer meat-and-potato terms). Slap it on a tortilla, roll it up and slather some cheese on top for a Mexican twist.

“As long as you don’t fry it, it’s healthy any way you look at it. The recipes are endless,” says Schmieder.

Still, not enough diners have raved to turn the tide toward McOstrich burgers specials of the month or roasted ostrich combos at Boston Market. “Most chefs don’t even know what muscles are in an ostrich, let alone what to do with them,” admits Chef Tony Huelster at FOX fires in Muncie, Indiana. And therein lies a big problem, Schmieder laments. “If the public demands it, the restaurants provide. But if the restaurants don’t provide, they don’t know to demand. It’s a vicious cycle.” He shakes his head, his chef hat swaying madly.

“In my humble opinion, it will take a lot of time, money and effort to increase the ostrich meat market,” says Bruce McLoughlin, an ostrich farmer whose wife serves as a trustee for the AOA’s research arm. Again, Schmieder, backed into a corner, agrees with his fellow patriot. “I’m pleased with Americans’ willingness to try it. But they’re not necessarily sold yet,” he says quietly.

### **High Steaks**

Americans who consider a medium-rare filet mignon a treat choke on the price of ostrich. For example, at Brandywine Meats in San Diego, filets go for \$11.95 a pound (12-pound minimum, please), thigh assortments run a hefty \$12.50 per pound, plain patties set you back \$4.10 a pound — although customers can squeeze four sandwiches from that \$4, the owners assure. Of course, prices may change without notice.

Those looking to cash in on raising the birds reel from even higher estate-mortgaging numbers. According to *Forbes*, a proven breeding pair in 1997 costs around \$2,500 — a bargain, actually. In the early part of this decade, the same couple would cost \$70,000, so plenty of the 3,800 estimated farmers today jumped into the market with their kids’ college tuitions in hand at the \$20,000 mark.

With those types of numbers, the real game thus far has been in selling breeding stock to those eager to reap the meat (and leather) profits they see floating in the sky. And where people are willing to take a gamble on a “sure-fire” winner, sharks circle to take the money. That’s how Trans-American Traders made Los Angeles headlines with fraud charges in the sale of 17 limited partnership offerings between November and December 1994. At the time, the Securities and Exchange Commission estimated that 350 people in this country lost a total of \$7.45 million in limited partnership investing for ostrich farms.

Those who do raise the creatures can expect \$300 per carcass from the slaughterhouses. After feeding costs, it counts out to \$150 profit per bird — that is, if they can find a slaughterhouse nearby that knows how to dismantle the creature. Like consumer demand, the industry peripherals, too, are missing. *Forbes* reports that the wholesale value of ostrich meat business in the United States in 1996 did not exceed \$5 million.

It's no wonder one poor soul in Texas let his emotions get the better of him one day last spring. Angered at the business loss, he beat his ostriches to death. "It's a five-year investment, not a five-minute investment," says David Telling, an ostrich rancher in Merced, California.

However, well-intentioned farmers have created some myths in their zealous attempts to defend the industry. Did you hear that ostrich is lower in cholesterol than other meats? (It has about the same, say Texas A&M University studies.) Or that ostrich corneas, tendons and hearts are used in human transplants? The AOA has yet to substantiate that one, despite asking for documentation every time someone brags on it.

Then there's the tale that ostrich feathers, eyelashes and toenails have a wide market of uses. While it's true that Las Vegas showgirls owe their modesty to ostrich feathers, and chances are good you owe the superior paint job on your car to them — General Motors uses the anti-static feathers to remove dust before painting automobile — there is no commercial market at this time for these things, the AOA assures. The economics of processing are just too unrealistic at the current numbers.

The AOA even takes issue with the idea that it must capture 1 percent of the meat market to be labeled successful.

Leather is a different story, sort of. Dr. Marjorie Mahler, president of John Mahler Company in Dallas, which imports-exports \$10 million hides a year, says ostrich is one of the toughest, yet supple hides on the market, second only to kangaroo. But much of that supply is coming from South Africa, not the United States.

"The most significant business move will be the development of a satisfactory ostrich leather market," says McLoughlin. "That is 70 percent of the bird's value, and we just can't seem to get a piece of that market. Tanning is the big problem. But when someone gets that done successfully, the price of ostrich meat should become much more competitive with alternative meats than it can be today," he reasons.

### **Ostrich Cowboys**

For the most part, the ostrich farmers are a down-to-earth lot. In the AOA's latest survey, it discovered that more than half the ostriches in the country can be found in four states: Texas with 26.2 percent, California with 11.2 percent, Arizona with 10.5 percent and Oklahoma with 6 percent. Of the AOA members, 14 percent also grow row crops, 25 percent raise other livestock. (A not surprising 12 percent also own emus; 7 percent are mixing rheas in the same pens as ostriches.)

Those statistics translate into farmers like Mark Harrison in Penrose, Colorado, the computer technician for a defense contractor at North American Aerospace Defense Command who was laid off. His neighbor, Bob Clarke, was a quality engineer at Martin Marietta. Bob Cabanya is still the director of defense and intelligence for Sprint Government Systems Division in addition to his farmer status. The country's largest ranch, Zion View Ranch in Hurricane, Utah, has former medical device salesman Richard White at the helm of the 5,500 ostriches running around his 250 acres.

No matter their former professions, they have one trait in common: patience. Even the Bible's reference to the bird says that "God did not endow her with wisdom or give her a share of good sense." (Job 39:17). Cabanya learned that lesson by viewing thousands of dollars in dead chicks lying across his ranch — ostriches must be taught how to peck and eat. "I've seen them run into a fence, frightened over nothing. Ostriches will look for reasons to die," Carol Stoll, a Waterloo, Wisconsin, ostrich farmer says. They'll also eat anything that isn't nailed down — including the nail.

"On the other hand, they can stay outside in winter," says Jerry Bondurant, a Lizton, Indiana, farmer.

So the real key comes down to a marketing twist, both in and outside the industry, Chef Schmiieder finally points out. Others in the field agree. For instance, Jim Russell, owner and operator of the King Ostrich Ranch in Gardner, Kansas, plans to convert part of his 160 acres into an amusement area lovingly called Ostrich World. He'll offer tours, a petting zoo for children, a view of an ostrich hatchery, and, of course, a bite or two of ostrich meat.

The annual Chandler (Ariz.) Ostrich Festival rolled out in that town nine years ago, and draws in 200,000 people during its four-day duration. In 1997, Ostrich Alley sold 22 booths to vendors wanting to hawk food, leather and craft eggs to the milling crowd. According to *Amusement Business*, the event hauled in a hefty profit somewhere between \$75,000 and \$85,000. Perhaps Chandler has finally found where the real interest — and money — lies in this quirky business.

“I take my chef’s hat off to these farmers!” says the 69-year-old Schmieder as he gathers his fact sheets and departs on yet another mission trip.