



Local Harvest

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Features

Local Farm Profile:
Banbury Emu Farm

Finding Specialty Meat
in Waterloo Region

Fresh in Focus:
Emu-sing Birds



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Local Farm Profile: Banbury Emu Farm

Some would argue that the closest living relatives to the dinosaur can be found on a certain Waterloo Region Farm. You see emus are large flightless birds which very closely resemble a dinosaur species from the middle Jurassic period 165 million years ago. In fact, a couple of scientists and a film crew from National Geographic recently visited Banbury Emu Farm in St. Agatha. They were making a documentary about the T-Rex and the emus' similar walking and running style.

But Michael Banbury would like to people to know more about the merits of emu, aside from their fascinating prehistoric roots. He began the operation in 1997 after his mother Sarah had read about the health benefits of emu meat and oil. Together they conducted some research and ended up investing in a breeding pair and six yearlings which would become pairs later on. Although Michael admits not knowing a whole lot about the curious birds at the time, he chose emu over ostrich because they are smaller and easier to deal with.

The Banbury Farm was purchased by Michael's parents in 1964 and for the first 15 years it was used for raising cattle and horses. In the eighties an equestrian facility was developed along with a year-round Bed and Breakfast. Today the horses are the primary business at the 86-acre farm. Sarah continues to run the B & B while Michael operates the emu business. He works full time as a French teacher in Cambridge and has purposefully kept the emu operation small enough to manage himself.

He notes that when they first began in the mid nineties "there was a lot of hype and emu farms were springing up everywhere". Many went too big too fast, hatching hundreds of birds each year when there wasn't enough demand for their huge supply, Michael suggests. Now Banbury Emu Farm is one of the very few in the region.

Currently at the farm there are three breeding pairs of emu, 14 yearlings to be processed this summer and 13 chicks. The adults begin breeding in December and



Photos: Matthew Kadey

Michael Banbury operates Banbury Emu Farm located at 1942 Wilby Road in Wilmot Township.



Emu are believed to be a survivor of prehistoric times with identically structured leg bones and joints as dinosaurs.

the first eggs are laid in late December. Michael begins incubating batches of eggs in January and it takes about two months before they hatch. The chicks are raised in the house and in a heated room in the barn. By the beginning of May they are turned out into the paddock for the summer. After about 14 months the birds are taken to an abattoir in Mildmay for processing. Approximately 30 to 40 pounds of meat comes from each bird. While steaks are the most sought after, ground emu and pepperettes are also popular.

Emu is a great tasting red meat that is high in iron and protein yet low in fat, cholesterol and calories. It has

continued on page 2



Local Farm Profile continued



Photos: Matthew Kadley

The emerald green eggs generally hatch in about 50 days; Chicks are 10 inches tall at birth with black and white stripes; Emu are full grown in 12-14 months measuring between 5 and 6 feet tall.

a texture and taste very similar to beef and can be substituted for most recipes that call for beef. Even the cost of emu is comparable to beef. Despite the multitude of benefits, many people have not yet bought into this 'miracle meat'. "Those who try emu meat usually love it and will continue to order more, but I still think there are many others who are very wary of the products", says Michael.

In an ongoing effort to raise the profile of emu and introduce more people to this great local meat, Michael has listed his farm on Foodlink's *Buy Local! Buy Fresh!* map since 2003. He has also participated in Taste Local! Taste Fresh! where his emu was most recently featured in savoury mini burgers topped with homemade salsas. Michael's preference, however, is to simply barbeque a filet and enjoy it with a dollop of chutney.

Those in search of Banbury emu will have to come directly to the farm to purchase it as it's currently not available in any retail shops. A variety of cuts can be purchased frozen, and at times fresh. In addition to the emu meat, Banbury also sells a line of homemade emu skin care products and soaps. Emu oil is considered to be a natural anti-inflammatory and is used to treat a variety of ailments including eczema, psoriasis and even fibromyalgia. The emu eggs are every bit as spectacular as the birds. The large, green speckled eggs are hollowed out and regularly sought after by artists and decorators. Although the yolks aren't generally consumed here, they are considered a delicacy in some parts of the world, says Michael.

Aside from getting people to think about Emu as a viable meat source, another challenge for Michael is the seasonal nature of the business. Because breeding season is just once per year the meat is only available at certain times--generally from late spring to early fall. This makes it difficult to be a consistent supplier to local restaurants. However, for a time it was being used by Charbries, a fine dining restaurant in Uptown Waterloo. The establishment, well-known for sourcing from local farms, used the ground emu in their Cabbage Rolls during Oktoberfest season. Foodies should keep an eye out for the reappearance of emu on local menus.

Although Michael admits business is at times sporadic he does have a host of regular committed customers and is gradually gaining new ones. He is always happy to show people around the farm so they can see for themselves how the animals are raised. They are fed a special formulated feed which is mixed with corn and are not given any hormones or antibiotics. The birds are free to run outside from about May to November and then the breeding pairs are put into stalls for the winter while the yearlings continue to be let outside during the day throughout the winter in a small contained area.

One of the biggest rewards of raising emu for Michael is "their uniqueness factor" and the pride and joy he experiences in showing them off to other people. One can't help but be intrigued by the emu in all of their peculiarity. But don't let their unnerving resemblance to the dinosaur dissuade you from giving emu a try! ♦



Finding Specialty Meats in Waterloo Region

Many local farm markets in Waterloo Region feature specialty meats including game birds, fish, rabbit and goat. If you are up for a new adventure why not consult Foodlink's new 2010 *Buy Local! Buy Fresh!* map for a listing of farms close by that sell specialty meats. Please call for hours and availability.

9 **Oakridge Acres Country Meat Store**
2132 Greenfield Rd., Ayr
519-632-7653
www.oakridgeacres.ca

30 **Banbury Emu Farm**
1942 Wilby Road, Baden
519-634-5451
www.banburyfarm.com

52 **Tosali Farms**
2119 Kossuth Road, Cambridge
519-716-4628

22 **Tanjo Family Farm**
2468 Lichty Road, RR #1 Millbank
519-698-2407

31 **Lyndon Fish Hatcheries**
1745 Huron Road, Petersburg
519-696-3474
www.lyndonfishhatcheries.com

69 **Mosborough Country Market**
5284 Wellington Rd. 32, RR #7 Guelph
519-763-5224
www.mosboroughmarket.ca

26 **Charles Quality Meats**
1448 Wilby Road, St. Agatha
519-886-7931

51 **Top Market Rabbitry**
5887 Splint Road, Ariss
519-716-9464



Emu-sing Birds

Sixty years ago, there would have been few North Americans who could claim to have known what an emu was, much less have had any contact with one. Throughout the first half of the 1900s, emus were imported from their native Australia into Canada as breeding stock for zoos. It was only later in the 1980s that emu began to appear here and there on our dinner plates. And while emu meat is still considered an exotic meat, it is fairly accessible in most provinces.



Emu are extremely curious birds and can at times be playful.

Emus are ratites, flightless birds that include the African ostrich, the New Zealand kiwi and the South American rhea. For hundreds of years the emu has been revered by the native Aborigines of Australia as they provided the people with meat, clothing and natural medicines. Unlike most other birds, including ostriches and rheas, emus have small wings in relation to their bodies. Their breastbones are flat with no keel to which the breast muscles would normally attach in flight birds. It is believed that emus probably flew in the past, but their environment enabled them to better adapt to running than flying. Indeed these unusual birds can run at speeds approaching 50km/hour with a stride of 3m.

Emus are known to be curious and docile. At birth, they stand about 10 inches tall with black and white stripes. At about 3 months, they turn almost completely black before emerging into their adult mixed colouring of tan, brown, and black, sometimes with a bluish neck. The feathers of the emu are somewhat unusual as well since none of them contain the stiff center vein we associate with bird feathers. All emu feathers are soft and downy, making them perfect for pillows and duvets. And, from a mature emu that measures between 5 and 6 feet tall (and between 90 and 150 pounds), there are plenty of feathers to go around.

Which Comes First?

Most emus begin laying at around two to three years of age and can lay 20 to 50 eggs over

the breeding season of October to April. With a lifespan of 25 to 35 years, these long lived birds can produce a fair number of progeny. In keeping with the “weird and wonderful” factor associated with these birds, emus produce emerald green eggs that weigh about 600g and measure 12cm in length. The egg itself is mostly yolk and would equal approximately 10 chicken eggs.

In its natural setting, the emu nest would lie in a shallow hole by a bush in the Australian grasslands. Up to 1.5m wide, it would be lined with leaves, grass and bark. The female lays between four and 20 eggs at a time that are incubated by her male partner for a period of about eight weeks. The male also cares for the chicks for about six months after they hatch. While emus are primarily herbivores, they also happily devour insects and small gizzard stones like most other birds.

More than Just Meat

Emu farmers are mainly interested in the meat provided by the birds. Known as an alternative red meat, emu is similar in taste and appearance to very lean beef but with higher protein content. A mature emu yields about 25-35 pounds of meat. It will also yield a unique oil that is obtained from a thick pad of fat found on the back and rump of the bird. Once rendered,

these fat deposits yield an average of 5 to 6 litres of oil. The Aborigines of Australia have long used emu oil in the treatment of muscle aches, sore joints, inflammation and swelling. It has been found to be anti-bacterial and anti-microbial as well. Studies are underway to investigate the healing properties of emu oil, but at this time there are no standardized measurements for emu oil supplementation.

However, initial research out of Auburn University in Australia has shown that emu oil is high in monounsaturated fatty acids, particularly oleic acid, an omega-9 fatty acid (40%), as well as polyunsaturated fatty acids such as omega-6 linoleic acid (20%). Saturated fats make up 20% of the total fats in the form of palmitic and stearic acid. This composition is consistent with current recommendations for a “heart-healthy diet” and may help explain the anti-inflammatory properties of the oil.

Overlaying all this meat and oil is a tough hide that measures about eight feet square in an adult bird. The tanned leather, which is supple and durable, has a reptilian appearance that is prized in upscale products such as boots, belts and luggage. In fact, emu skin provides an acceptable substitute for the hides of some endangered reptile species. Not surprisingly in

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continued from page 3

this multipurpose animal, every part of the emu seems to provide application to human needs. Since the emu shell normally has at least three layers of colour (dark green, teal and finally an inner layer of white), it can be engraved or carved into beautiful patterns. And last, but not least, the toenails can be polished and used in jewellery designs.

Emu Farms in Ontario

The Agricultural Census of 1996 was the first in which the number of emu farms was recorded. In that year there were 328 emu farms in Ontario with a total of almost 44,000 birds. By 2006, that number had dropped to 65 farms with less than 1200 birds. According to agricultural economists, the inability of growers and their markets to live up to initial expectations eventually led to the Great Emu Bubble of 1993-1996. In the early 1990s, over 300 Ontario farmers switched their production from conventional livestock into emus, ostriches and rhea believing that the meat and oil would command premium prices over competing products. While initially the breeder industry flourished, the subsequent crash in the late 1990s can be traced to excessive speculation in the forward price of breeding pairs as well as the absence of a sustainable consumer market.

Many growers left the emu industry behind and moved on to other kinds of farming. Those who survived did two things that helped them stay competitive: first, they specialized in certain areas such as hatching, breeding, feathers, hides, oils, and personal care products and second, they maintained small flocks as hobbies or as a secondary source of income. And, survive many did – a quick internet search turns up numerous emu farms across the province that often offer more than just meat products. Emus are one of the few animals whose total body is consumed in so many ways. As a healthy alternative to other meats as well as a commitment to holistic approaches to farming, emu is certainly worth searching out at local farmers' markets, retailers and onsite farm stores. ♦

Emu with Beer Gravy

Emu is a wonderful versatile meat that can be substituted for just about any recipe that calls for beef. Here's a tasty emu stew to serve alongside your favourite seasonal veggies.

What you will need:

- 3 lbs emu meat cut into cubes
- 2 tablespoon oil
- 5 large onion slices
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1 tablespoon garlic chopped
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon thyme
- 1 tablespoon vinegar
- 3 tablespoon flour
- 1 can beef stock
- 1-2 bay leaves
- 1 bottle of local beer
- salt and pepper



Method:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Brown meat in pan. In another pan, brown onions with butter, combine in large casserole dish. Add flour to oil in pan where you browned the meat, mix, pour in beer and beef stock, bring to a boil and add rest of the ingredients. Pour over casserole and mix together. Cover tight and cook in oven for 2 to 2 1/2 hours. Serve with boiled new potatoes and your favourite in-season local vegetables.

Makes 6 servings

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Did You Know?

The emu is the largest bird in Australia, and the second largest in the world after the ostrich.

The emu feather is the only "double quill" bird feather with two feathers per follicle.

Emus adapt well to temperature extremes from in excess of 100 degrees to below zero.

The Emu, along with the Kangaroo, is featured on the Australian Coat Of Arms. These two animals were chosen for the honour because they cannot travel backwards, and can only move forward.