

SECTION 4

- PAULA: Today I'd like to introduce Ted Hunter, who used to rear sheep and poultry but who is here to tell us about a rather unusual type of livestock that he's been concentrating on in the last few years. Ted Hunter is a member of the Domesticated Ostrich Farming Association, and is here to tell us about the possibilities of breeding and rearing these birds here in this country.
- TED: Thank you, Paula. When you look at international restaurant menus and supermarkets they all tend to feature the same range of meats - beef, lamb, chicken, pork, that sort of thing. But people are always interested in something different and we're now finding that farming can bring new types of meat to our tables. The kangaroo is one animal that's now being farmed for its meat and eaten outside Australia, where it comes from. It looks and tastes rather like rabbit, though it's slightly darker in colour, but it is rather tough, so that's a problem for some people. Crocodiles are also being farmed for their meat. This is rather like chicken, pale and tender, and it's getting quite fashionable. Some people also find it's rather fatty, but I think it makes a really tasty sandwich. Now a third type of meat becoming increasingly available, and the one that I think is by far the nicest of the three, is ostrich, which most people say has a similar taste and texture to beef. However, it's much better for you than beef, as we'll see later. Most people think of ostriches as wild animals, but in fact ostriches have been farmed in South Africa since around 1860. At first they were produced for their feathers. In Africa they were used for tribal ceremonial dress and they were also exported to Europe and America where they were made into ladies' fans and used for decorating hats. Later, feather fans and big, decorated hats went out of fashion but ostriches were still bred, this time for their hide. This can be treated to produce about half a square metre of leather - very delicate, fine stuff of very good quality. At the same time, some of the meat was used for biltong - the air-dried strips of meat popular in South Africa as a sort of fast food. However, recently there's been more and more interest in the development of ostrich farming in other parts of the world, and more people are recognising its value as a food source. Ostrich meat is slightly higher in protein than beef - and much lower in fats and cholesterol. It tastes good too. A series of European taste tests found that 82% of people prefer ostrich to beef. And one ostrich produces a lot of meat - from around 30 to 50 kg, mostly from the hindquarters of the bird. Farmed ostriches don't need African climates, and in fact ostrich farming is now becoming well established in other parts of the world. However, setting up an ostrich farm isn't something to embark on lightly. Mature breeding birds are very expensive - even a fertilised ostrich egg isn't cheap so you need quite a bit of capital to begin with. Then the farmer needs special equipment such as incubators for the eggs. The young chicks are very dependent on human minders, and need a lot of attention from the people looking after them. In addition, ostriches can't be intensively farmed - they need space and exercise.
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But in spite of this they make good farming sense. A cow produces only one calf a year whereas a female ostrich can lay an egg every other day. And because the farmers can use incubators and hatched chicks are nourished well and protected from danger, the failure rate on farms is very low indeed and almost all the fertilised eggs will hatch out into chicks which will in turn reach maturity. This is very different from the situation in the wild, where the vast majority of chicks will die or be killed before they grow up into mature ostriches. So it's possible, once the initial outlay has been made, for the farmer to be looking at very good profit margins indeed. Ostrich farming is still in its early days outside Africa but we hope that ostrich meat will be freely available soon and before long will be as cheap as beef.