

## Market Grows For Ostrich Meat

Michael Lehman says the market for ostrich meat is growing quickly. When Lehman moved home to a small farm in Oregon, he looked for income options, and ostrich caught his eye.

"I fell in love with them as an exotic meat animal for the challenge of building a business from scratch," says Lehman. "There was very little information available, so you had to be creative and build up a knowledge base."

Lehman found that veterinary knowledge, as well as management information, was hard to come by. Even finding a slaughterhouse that can handle a 7-ft. tall, 250-lb. bird can be difficult.

"When we decided to try ostrich production, we started by buying some meat, tasting it and sharing it with friends," says Lehman. "We took it to lots of farmers markets and offered samples. We wanted to find out if people would buy it and what they would pay. We had an enormous positive response."

Lehman concentrated first on the grower market rather than the breeding and brooding side of the business. He developed a ration of fortified brewers grain from a local brewery that he feeds for 12 to 14 mos., supplemented with foraging.

"It is a low-density diet, but they are eating machines," says Lehman. "They are eating all the time."

After a few years, Lehman began raising his own chicks. Today he produces all of his own birds, maintaining breeding families in colonies of 10 birds in their own 3 to 4-acre paddocks. He believes the space and family grouping improve temperament.

"We try to handle them as naturally as we can with room to run and play and dig out nests," says Lehman.

He notes that ostriches are very social and move as a unit. "They have an attention span of about 5 seconds," explains Lehman. "You want enough running room so they will forget why they are running by the time they reach the other side of the paddock."

Each paddock is surrounded by a fence consisting of a high tensile wire at an 8-ft.



**Michael Lehman sees a lot of potential in ostrich meat and produces his own birds. Photo below shows ostrich filet and ground ostrich meat packaged for sale.**



height with a visual barrier covering the top 4 ft. with woven wire beneath. Lehman stresses that the strength of the fence is less important than the visual barrier.

"An adult ostrich has about 80 lbs. of meat, which sells for about \$10 per lb.," says Lehman, a board member of the American Ostrich Association. "We have about \$325 invested in them, including the cost of the chick. What other ag business has a 200 percent return?"

Lehman is excited about the potential for ostrich as a meat animal and believes they are well-suited for sustainable farming. His have done well, even with temperatures dipping to a minus 10°F.

Lehman reports that breeding age adults sell in the \$3,000 range, while 30-day old chicks can run \$200 each. Chicks sold in larger quantities sell for \$150 each.

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## Farm-Produced Artisan Oils

Georgia farmer Clay Oliver set out to make biofuel for his tractors and ended up producing artisan oils for the kitchen. Now Oliver Oil Co. makes multiple food-grade oils, as well as flour from the meal byproduct.

Oliver raised peanuts, pecans and sunflowers. He bought an oilseed press in 2012.

Oliver didn't expect to find a market for peanut oil, as it was already plentiful. However, chefs who tried his oil liked it for its green peanut flavor. A market developed for his other cold-pressed oils as well. Unlike most commercial processes, cold pressing uses neither chemicals nor high temperatures to remove oil.

"People are more concerned about over processed or highly processed foods," says Oliver. "We use screw presses to extract the oil, run it through a filter and a centrifuge to clean it, and then we bottle it. The natural vitamins, minerals, colors, flavors and smells are there."

When a chef mentioned benne, an African word for sesame seed, Oliver pressed oil from it as well. Today he presses and markets pecan, green peanut, sunflower,

benne, pumpkin and okra seed oils. He infuses oils with herbs and spices.

Soon he moved into making flours as well. The gluten-free flour is milled onsite using the remains of nuts and seeds left over when the oil is removed. The flour is high in protein and low in carbohydrates. Oliver notes that they are interchangeable with wheat flour in many recipes and especially good for bread and batters.

"We had this really dry, defatted seed or nut meal," says Oliver. "I saw an ad for a mill, bought it and started grinding the meal into a really fine flour. The pecan flour gives a neat flavor and texture and is great in brownie and cookie recipes."

Oliver gives a lot of credit for his success to word-of-mouth promotion. Soon after buying his first oil press, he was invited to speak at a Growing Local conference. Attendees referred him to a chef in Atlanta who likes to support local foods.

"He happened to be a celebrity chef, and his word of mouth and promotion helped us grow," says Oliver.

Oliver acknowledges educating the public as the biggest challenge he faced. While the chef's endorsement helped, he also took



**Shelby Smith raises crickets on her parents' Iowa farm and has developed a line of nutritious snacks, including protein bars made in a variety of flavors.**

## She Raises Crickets On Iowa Farm

Instead of cultivating fields on her parents' Iowa farm, Shelby Smith took over a breakroom and office in the farm shop for her agricultural enterprise. She purchased her breeding stock in January 2018 – 10,000 crickets. By the end of the year she had about 400,000 crickets in 80 18-gal. totes stacked in less than 200 sq. ft. of space in the two rooms.

At 28, Smith says she took her corn and soybean producer father's advice to find a niche market. After reading articles and hearing podcasts about the benefits of crickets as a human protein source, she took a leap of faith and purchased 10,000 crickets without knowing if she would enjoy eating them.

Turns out that she does and, as a power lifter, she's developed a line of nutritious snacks that appeals to athletic competitors as well as people interested in healthy food alternatives. Appropriately, she named her business Gym-N-Eat Crickets. She dry roasts crickets and makes protein bars in a variety of flavors that satisfy cravings for crunchy and salty or sweet snacks.

"Sixty percent of a cricket is protein by dry weight, compared to 30 percent protein in steak," Smith says, noting it takes about 3,000 crickets to make a pound. "Crickets also have more iron than spinach, more calcium than milk, and all nine essential amino acids."

The rooms in her parents' shop work well because they're double-insulated and heated to maintain temperatures between 80 and 90 degrees. Totes have screen-covered vent holes with egg cartons inside to raise the crickets from eggs to maturity in about 8 weeks. Crickets lay 5 to 10 eggs a day and can produce up to 1,000 eggs during their lifetime in the wild. She feeds her crickets chicken feed.

She harvests crickets by first freezing them, then roasting and seasoning them for snack



**Cricket breeding stock is stacked in 18-gal. totes in rooms inside their farm shop.**

items, or grinding them in a coffee grinder to make flour for energy bars. Her products don't contain gluten or sugar, which appeals to consumers. However, she emphasizes that crickets are in the same family as shell fish, so people with shell fish allergies should avoid crickets.

Smith is thankful for the support of her parents and boyfriend as she slowly grows her business. She sells cricket products at farmers markets, and from home through the internet. Eventually she plans to expand into her own facility with a certified kitchen.

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**Georgia farmer Clay Oliver makes multiple food-grade oils, as well as flour, from biofuel meal byproducts.**

his products to local farmers markets for feedback.

"We found out what people liked and didn't," he says. "We changed our bottle sizes and added recipes and use suggestions to labels and shared what people said on our website and in social media."

Oliver admits he didn't intend to go down the road he has. "I was intending to make

biofuel to fuel my center pivots," he says. "I saw a niche with the oils that others weren't doing. We never borrowed any money. We started small and grew little by little."

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