



Photo by Jilly MacIver

Struisvogel owner and rancher Brittany Denouden interacts with her farm-raised ostriches. They tolerate her presence but opt to not get too close.

Ostrich meat offers unique taste

By Jilly MacIver

Struisvogel Ranch guarantees one thing – good quality meat. What kind of meat you may ask? Beef? Chicken? Pork? None of the above; Ostrich.

You're probably thinking that it "tastes like chicken" but, you'd be mistaken, ostrich meat is red and like your best cut of beef; a filet mignon. There are not many places in Ontario (let alone Canada) to find ostrich meat, but Struisvogel Ranch in Rednersville, Ont. is one place to get it.

Caleb and Brittany Denouden first got the idea to start an ostrich meat farm in 2007 when they volunteered for a year in South Africa and were immersed in the world of ostrich farming. While they were there, they rode ostriches, toured farms, and got their first taste of this unique meat.

"We have fields of cattle here; they have

fields of ostriches," Brittany said.

The couple quickly discovered that they wanted to start their own ostrich farm, but in their home country of Canada. They did some research on whether or not ostriches could withstand Canadian temperatures, and fascinatingly – they can, despite being desert birds.

"If they can do it so easily here (in South Africa), why can't we do this at home, we thought," Brittany explained about her reasoning.

Thirteen years later in 2020 – during the height of the pandemic, Brittany and Caleb bought their first ostrich and began building the necessary barns to house them. Unlike most other businesses, Struisvogel thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic, making local deliveries, and getting their name out there.

Twenty years ago, Brittany and Caleb would not have dreamed going into the

ostrich meat business. They initially met at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ont. There, Brittany studied psychology, and Caleb studied business administration and management.

Caleb still uses his degree, as he was appointed director of finance for the City of Quinte West, whereas Brittany chose to be head rancher at Struisvogel and now uses her psychology degree to best read the birds!

Struisvogel doesn't stop at meat. The Denoudens make a point of using as much of the bird as they can. From ostrich feather dusters to dog bones, to decorative eggs, Struisvogel has it all, including the community supporting them. To get the community more involved, Struisvogel offers "ostrich walks" where families can come, learn about the ostriches, and feed them. As far as "backlash goes" the Denoudens say the ranch doesn't receive

much, other than the odd person displeased/appalled by the exotic meat and/or mistaking the ranch for a petting zoo.

Asked if her family ate ostrich every day, Brittany responded,

"Yes, but then again, we don't eat meat every night, but when we do, we have ostrich – because nothing compares."

The process of raising ostriches for slaughter/processing is another thing. Ostriches can live up to 70 years old, but at Struisvogel, they are processed at one year. This rule doesn't apply to every ostrich on the ranch. The ranch has a select few "breeders", and those ostriches dedicate their lives to reproducing for the ranch's profit. The "breeders" will live out their full lives at the ranch, but one must ask, is this a reward, or just another cycle? Ostriches lay eggs until they die, but it's up to the ranchers to fertilize them – and even then, it doesn't always

work out.

The life of a "breeder" ostrich is a strange one; to live to produce children, but to also watch them disappear, one must wonder what that feels like from a mother's perspective.

Brittany describes the average personality of an ostrich to be "quirky and clumsy, like pesky little toddlers."

As far as "friendliness" goes, you should probably opt out of getting too close.

What's next for Struisvogel? Expanding is their top priority. Living on 72 acres there is plenty of space to build more barns and house more ostriches. As of right now, they're using three acres for the 110-120 birds they have.

Asked if she gets attached to the ostriches, Brittany responds with a non-hesitative "no, you can't, because they are food – that is except for the breeders."

Wood becomes canvas for this artist's work

By Nic Adam

They are standing in an older couple's backyard in Concession, Ont. One is an eight-foot bear, made from a 107-old ash tree; and the other a six-foot wolf, also made from an ash tree, this one 65 years old. Both incredibly detailed and realistic.

While it may sound like a contractor doing renovations, it's actually Dan Decouvreur creating his intricately beautiful art.

The only tools Decouvreur needs to make his art are a basic, run of the mill, Stihl chainsaw and a whole lot of elbow grease. After learning to whittle around the ages of six to eight and going to art school in Toronto, Decouvreur has been interested in creating art out of wood for most of his life.

He didn't initially pursue art as a career though. Dan started his company, Boislux (meaning luxury in wood), three years ago after quitting his job as a data analyst.

He's actually one of the only chainsaw carvers in the area who will work with hardwood. He finds that the chainsaw cuts through hardwood but tends to tear through softwood. In fact, his favourite type of wood to work with is ash, a very common hardwood.

Decouvreur doesn't advertise his work; all his customers find out about him by word of mouth. In the three years Boislux has been around, it's been steadily growing. In his first year he carved 48 sculptures, 65 in his second year, and over 100 in this year alone. It's gotten to the point where, sometimes, his dad helps him out with the staining and the clear coating.

Decouvreur likes the natural look that linseed oil brings out and mixes it with a little bit of paint thinner to speed up the drying process. He'll usually apply two to three coats depending on the sculpture by hand with a paint brush, followed by another two passes this time with a clear coat.

Unfortunately, because of this unavoidable step, Decouvreur can't do commissions year-round. If the temperature drops below 10 C, the clear coat will stay tacky. To combat this during the cooler working months, he always keeps a propane torch handy just in case.

While waiting for each coat to dry, Decouvreur was keeping busy by making a couple benches out of the spare logs.

"You know the saying, measure twice and cut once? It goes double with chainsaws," remarked Decouvreur as he was finishing his next cut.

While he had forgotten his measuring tape that morning, that wouldn't stop him. In a stroke of genius, he grabbed a ratchet strap from his car and fashioned it into a makeshift measuring tape.

While the majority of his cuts are marked out with



Photo by Nic Adam

Chainsaw carver Dan Decouvreur carves a mermaid from a 160-year-old sugar maple tree for the Lakehurst Estate.

permanent markers, Decouvreur prefers to use a pencil for the finer details like fur or scales. I saw this in abundance the next day in Cobourg, Ont., where Decouvreur had been commissioned by the Lakehurst Estate to turn their 160, or so, year-old sugar maple tree into a beautiful mermaid.

There were hundreds of scales, each put there one by one with the tip of his blade. This is the most tedious and tiring part of the process as you have to use muscles you don't normally use while carving. Typically, the left hand controls your height, angle, and stability, while the right

hand controls where the blade points, and its speed. But when adding these scales, the right hand has to help every step of the way.

The tank in his saw only holds about half a litre of fuel, so he usually stops every 20 to 30 minutes to put more in, and to top up the bar oil. During one of these times, he asked to show me something.

He pointed out a spot on the tail where a termite's nest used to be. There were a couple grubs still hanging in there, but not for long. He reached his hand in and pulled them out one by one with his bare hand.

Decouvreur will only carve using dead trees, most of them having died from pests like ash borers or termites.

As he got up to go refuel his saw, he jokingly said, "I committed a war crime; a massacre. At least that's what the termites would say."

It only takes a few days of good weather to make one of his sculptures from start to finish, so that's why he's able to make so many each year. With the rate Boislux is growing in popularity, it wouldn't be surprising to see Decouvreur, or his work, known across the nation in the years to come.