

## How

## do you know you don't

If you go down to the country today you might be in for a big surprise. Fields once filled with the customary cows and sheep might well be filled with members of a slightly less familiar species: the Southern African ostriches. The largest animals on two legs are capturing the imagination of Belgian farmers who are searching for a lucrative alternative to dead-end cattle farming.

Trotting in a backgarden pen in the sleepy village of Wijnmaal, near Leuven, with the wind billowing out their soft feathers, are 24 ostriches, six males (distinguished by their dark plumage) and 18 females. Brought over on a charter flight from Namibia, the rubbery-necked creatures are getting to know each other before being transferred to a larger farm nearby where they will be separated into groups (one male to every two or three females) to begin breeding.

Members of the ratite family, which also includes emus, rheas, kiwis and cassowaries, the birds belong to Guy Wauters, who was introduced to them on one of his many trips to Africa. "I first went to Africa in 1984 for a six-month holiday. I had a master of science degree in livestock and animal nutrition and was looking for somewhere to work," recalls Wauters.

After clinching a job as an export manager, he became a regular visitor to Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Malawi. He became involved in the breeding of ostriches in 1989 when he took part in a wildlife project organized by The Ostrich Producers Association of Zimbabwe (Topaz).

The project recognized that game farming was an important form of revenue for the local people and could even reduce the killing of elephants for their tusks. The domestic breeding of ostriches — whose meat can be eaten, feathers made into dusters or duvets, skins turned into good-quality leather — soon proved viable.

Ostriches are fast becoming an attractive proposition to Belgian farmers, too. "Unlike cattle and pigs that have been bred for thousands of years and are now becoming quite sensitive, ostriches are strong animals that can live quite easily in our climate," explains Wauters. Ostriches survive both the blistering heat and the sub-zero temperatures of the desert. Our more

He came home to roost and his birds followed him. Rosamond Green meets a Belgian farmer with a taste for a different breed

consistent weather must seem tame by comparison. The only drawback is the rain. Ostrich feathers are not water-proof and the bird is not intelligent enough to seek shelter during a downpour.

Last year, Wauters decided it was time to return to Belgium and see if it was possible to breed the birds over here. He has kept some birds in Africa and has another batch in Holland so as not to have all his eggs in one basket, so to speak. This approach will also help him to determine how well the birds breed when moved from one climate to another.

The market for ostrich meat in Europe and the United States has rapidly expanded over the last few years. Cuts of the red meat are already for sale at GB and Delhaize supermarkets. The flesh is said to have very low cholesterol and fat levels, is high in protein, tastes like beef but has fewer than half the calories. At the moment, Belgian farmers are only involved in a breeding market, but once the numbers have increased, they will go into meat production.

Claire Vandervoort is the president of the recently established European Ostrich Association, which is holding its first international conference for breeders on June 19 in Brussels. "People are talking more and more about ostrich farming," she says. "We act as a central pool of information where people can come and seek advice." Vandervoort ran her own ostrich farm in Africa and, now living in Belgium permanently, shares her knowledge with breeders who are just starting up.

"You fall in love with them and that's it," she says of these comical creatures that are frequently targetted in cartoons.



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## like it?

After sharing a pen with 25 of these gangly birds, each one noisier than the other, I thought it would take a while before I became quite as starry-eyed as Claire Vandervoodt. Cute they might be, but only from a distance. In real life, these creatures that measure two metres in height and weigh 136 kilos on average, are quite awesome. What's more, they are incorrigibly nosy and peck at anything that shines, which includes earrings and the attached earlobe.

Ostriches have been bred domestically for hundreds of years in southern Africa and so are quite used to being penned up for the purpose. Unlike in England, where you need to renew a breeder's licence every year, setting up a farm in Belgium is fairly easy.

"The hardest part of the breeding process is incubating the eggs for about 42 days. There is often a high mortality rate during the first few months," says Wauters. "The condition of the paddock and the feed all have an effect on the quality of the egg."

**A** single ostrich produces about 28 offspring a year (compared to one calf per cow), so if you get it right, you could be looking at a lucrative little business. Wauters, one of half a dozen ostrich breeders in Belgium, is optimistic that the idea will catch on. "In the end, although their meat will remain a delicacy, ostriches will not be any more unusual to breed than turkeys and chickens. You only have to look at the US, Israel or Africa to see how much the industry is being developed. Thanks to the Ostrich Associations, though, we can ensure that it is set up well," he said.

Just this year, ostrich breeders have started up businesses in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, France, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Belgium and Britain. Wauters will be one of the breeders (and traders) to represent Belgium at the June 19 conference when the European Ostrich Association is bringing together speakers from Germany, the United States and the Netherlands to discuss health problems, the incubation and hatching process, and to offer a chance for new members to get acquainted. The event takes place at the Palace Hotel where a special — you guessed it — ostrich lunch will be served.