

❖ ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE

Today's menu: Emu, wild rice, trout and grapes

Chenango farmers cook up some innovative alternatives to supplement dairy income

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Last year the agricultural community witnessed a new interest in alternative forms of agriculture with emus leading the way and wild rice, trout and grapes also on the table for discussion. As more and more dairy farmers attempt to subsidize their earnings, they are turning to forms of agriculture which seem foreign to many in the farming community.

For Ward Rounsaville of Polkville, alternative agriculture can also mean environmentally sound agriculture. "We are looking at ways to help keep the environment clean while supporting new forms of agriculture in the area," he said. "Our trout operation is one such form. We use the runoff water and capture it to assist in the growing of the trout. We know there is a large market for the fish out there and it becomes a relatively economical way to increase some farm profits. The major benefit of this form of agriculture is that we can set up an operation in areas where, perhaps, there is not a lot of water, because there is always some natural runoff."

Rounsaville said in 1996 the trout operation was successful and he is looking at funding for the erection of a similar project at

another site in Chenango County. "Right now we are interested in the BOCES area as they seem to have a minimal amount of water there. It would show just how well this type of agriculture could operate here. In fact, we expect to be able to begin that project in the new year," he said.

Rounsaville also grows wild rice - another alternative to the established dairy farming of the area. "The wild rice crop does very well and again, it uses surface runoff water as a base for its growth. This year we harvested a good crop and I think it has real potential," he said.

Not satisfied with the fish and rice, the Polkville man began looking around for another crop that would be easy to grow and yet return a good investment while at the same time being environmentally friendly. "We looked at several varieties of grapes that could be grown in this type of a climate and we finally found one that we think shows real promise," he said.

The variety, Candice, is a seedless grape that Rounsaville describes as hardy with a sweet taste. "It's a very good juice grape and I think we could do well with it. It would be a very marketable product," he said.

1996 was also the year of the bird - or at least the emu - in

Chenango County. Farmers began to discover a need for the raising of this livestock which provides red meat for consumers, leather and feathers for the fashion industry and oil for the pharmaceutical companies. What began as the raising of a few birds by one or two farmers, has grown into a major crop for eight Chenango County farm families and has seen the formation of the Central New York Ratite Producers, a group dedicated to sharing information concerning the raising of emus, ostriches and other uncommon livestock.

David Randall, Guilford, is one of the county's early entries into the raising of emus, a livestock he finds fascinating. "We began this as a way to find an alternative to dairy farming," he said. "The farm wasn't making much money in dairy and we had to look at alternatives or getting out of farming completely. The emus have made a big difference and there is now a big interest in them in the area."

The Cornell Cooperative Extension, Chenango County, is assisting those looking at alternative farming. The Extension highlighted emus during 1996, selling emu burgers on Agricultural Appreciation Day at the Chenango County Fair and a chef's training course and public



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tasting of emu meat later in year. Agent Karen Hoffman the raising of Emus and ostriches is not as difficult as it appear. "Most of the ratites relatively easy to get started business with. Generally need some land - about one-acre for a pair of emus or one for ostriches - materials to feed the birds in with, shelter extremes in whether, and enough capital to buy birds, feed, an incubator for eggs once the birds begin to lay," she said.

In 1997, Cooperative Extension expects to see more farmers looking at alternative agriculture as a way to supplement their income.