

Taking a Gander at Geese

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To cook a goose, it's best to separate the bird into pieces, allowing the seasoned legs to cook slowly in their own fat until the meat -- now called confit -- is falling off the bone, and rendering the schmaltz from the breast until the skin is a crispy golden. Then, sear the breast meat over a hot flame and finish it in the oven, so that it ends up a warm brown on the outside, and a richly red medium-rare in the center. The resulting flesh tastes more like steak than like chicken, with a rich, savory quality that is unparalleled among poultry.

Last year at Gozzard City, based at Provender Farm in Cabot, Vermont, my partner and I raised 300 of these big, robust, and delicious birds. It was our second year as goose farmers, and our first doing grant-funded farm work. The aim of the grant -- which came from Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NE-SARE) -- was to learn how three groups of birds would grow when fed differing amounts of grass and grain, and to determine whether or not there would be a marked difference in flavor.

We gathered a great deal of data over the course of the farm season, testing pasture, tracking feed, and weighing each group of birds once per week on a platform scale built of plywood. From that, we learned about how efficient geese were at turning varying amounts of grass and grain into flesh (called "feed conversion ratio"), and about how quickly or slowly they grew on different diets.

The birds went out into the pasture during the day, nibbling on clover, grass and dandelion, but avoiding buttercups, sensitive fern and dock. At night, they slept in a reinforced nighthouse, built of posts and wire mesh, surrounded by three strands of electric fencing. Our fortress proved highly effective: Despite the many nights I awoke in a panic as I heard coyotes howling in our lower field, we didn't lose a single bird to predation.

In September, we turned them out into a field of rye -- the heads bowing under the weight of the ripening grain -- to see if they could harvest the berries on their own. And they did. Beaks pointed towards the sky, they nibbled the plants, leaving naked stalks behind. (We weren't surprised: given the chance, geese will chew their way through nearly anything, including our clothes, and the wiring of farm trucks). We went through the field behind them swinging our scythes, and tossed the arm-harvested bales into their houses, to be used as bedding.

Goose noises grow louder as the season progresses, chirps and squeaks progressing to tentative honks and then to full throated squonking, as we like to call it. The birds don't roost at night like chickens do, and even from our tiny house, up a hill and at least a thousand feet from the field, I could hear their chatter at all hours of the day and night. By October, as we planned our slaughter, being in the field was kind of like sitting in a car in a New York City traffic jam.

In our first year as goose farmers, our processing proved very inefficient, taking us an hour and a half per bird, from kill cone to vacuum-sealed bag. Why? Because waterfowl feathers are meant to protect birds that swim in freezing water and migrate thousands of miles, meaning that those suckers are oily and water-repellant, and very firmly attached. We

scalded them, tugged at them, waxed them and tweezed them until the birds were nude, but it wasn't easy. And it was very, very slow.

With the goal of becoming profitable -- at 90 minutes per bird there was no chance -- we invested in a few pieces of equipment -- a rotating scalding big enough for several birds at a time, and a plucker outfitted with special fingers designed specifically for waterfowl. And, we paid close attention to the birds' molting cycle. Every six weeks or so, there is a day or two when the feathers are easier to pluck. A poultry expert told us to look for the day that feathers begin floating around in the field. We wanted to slaughter on those very days.

Generally, we succeeded. With careful planning, a well-trained work crew and our retrofitted decades-old gear, we were able to cut our processing time to just 25 minutes per bird. Triumphant and exhausted, after grueling weeks of killing geese and working at our other jobs, we celebrated the end of the year's processing days with some goose confit and a little sautéed liver.

Now that the birds were sealed tightly and neatly packed into several commercial freezers, it was time for the next phase of our study -- a blind taste test. Would regular eaters -- not chefs or food critics -- be able to tell one the meat of one group from the next? And so, to answer that question, we invited eight people -- mainly farmers and non-profit employees -- to join us at my tiny, farm-to-table restaurant, Salt Café.

Since I am one of the best consumers of my own product -- I purchase around one goose per week, and am perpetually changing the menu -- I may have the distinction of having served goose in more ways than any other American eatery. We've made goose confit over browned-butter waffles with plum mostarda; goose legs braised with prunes, sauerkraut and Riesling wine; and goose breast slathered with spicy "Buffalo" sauce and served over celeriac and carrot slaw with blue cheese dressing.

But on this evening, the fare was much more basic. I prepared goose with no seasoning other than salt, so the tasters would be able to identify subtle differences in the meat. With questionnaires in front of them, the eight panelists first ranked their preferences for four different types of poultry breast -- chicken, turkey, duck and goose. The result: they preferred goose to all of the other poultry products, with five of the eight ranking it as their favorite, and nobody ranking it as their least or second to least favorite. They described goose with words like rich, savory, buttery and meaty.

Their next task was to sample meat from the legs and breasts of geese in our different test groups, and see if they could tell the difference. The tasters chewed slowly, pensive looks on their faces, as they tried to suss out the differences between the pieces of meat. On detailed questionnaires, created to capture as much information as possible about the look, smell and taste of the goose meat, they wrote down their impressions.

Describing the group that ate more grass and less grain, participants noted a gamey quality and a chewier texture. The birds that consumed more grain had meat that was more tender, with a richer layer of fat, and were also somewhat less flavorful. Several people in the group, plus we goose farmers, found the middle group to have the best combination of flavor and texture. Like mama bear's porridge in Goldilocks, the birds from our "red group," with the most balanced diets, tasted just right.

No matter how delicious the goose, marketing it is still a challenge. A 1996 study by the Food Safety and Inspection service indicated that Americans consume less than .34 pounds of duck per year (down from .44 pounds per year in 1986). And, the report states, the consumption of goose is even lower. In fact, even in Vermont -- home to many adventurous eaters eager to try things like braised goat with mole sauce and tongue tacos -- most of my restaurant customers have never before had a morsel of goose pass their lips.

So, to run a successful goose farm, Wesley and I have our work cut out for us. In addition to providing our geese with good pasture, fresh clear water and safety from roving predators, we must also be culinary educators, pastured poultry advocates, waterfowl evangelists, and most of all, we've got to enable as many people as possible to try their first, tender and perfectly seasoned bites of goose confit.