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## Big birds mean big business

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BRANDON KRUSE / The Palm Beach Post

A female ostrich on the farm of Madeleine Calder, Palm Beach realtor and owner of Blue Heaven Ostrich Farm.

Madeleine Calder used to be a Manhattan real estate agent, but when the market collapsed in 1989, she suddenly needed a new income stream.

"I saw this brief report on CNN about an ostrich farm in Colts Neck, N.J., and said, 'Let's go look.'"

Intrigued, she did some research and purchased four ostriches. She had pens built at her country house in Connecticut and enlisted a friend's nephew as caretaker.

"Then the young man said he had fallen in love with Miss Alabama and was moving. I had these four giant birds in my back yard," Calder recalled. "I became very hands-on with my birds."

Now more than 20 years later, Calder operates Blue Heaven Ostrich Inc., a 5-acre ranch on a tranquil pine- and palm tree-studded parcel in Loxahatchee Groves, where she moved the enterprise in 2004.

Blue Heaven is home to four prized breeding pairs: Rhett Butler and Miss Scarlett, Gallagher Bird and Charlene, Ken Doll and Little Bit, and Bob and Baby.

Each of the fast-moving flightless birds, native to Africa, has its own personality, Calder said.

The females can produce as many as 100 eggs a season. Calder eats, donates or sells many of them. She also ships some to ranchers in other states. When the birds are 10 to 13 months old, they are slaughtered and processed at U.S. Department of Agriculture certified facilities. The frozen meat is then shipped to her West Palm Beach warehouse.

From there, she fills orders on her website ([gourmetostrich.com](http://gourmetostrich.com)) and ships products, from "birdogs," an ostrich hot dog, to ostrich steaks, burgers, kabobs and even ostrich-stuffed pasta. Calder declined to provide sales figures because the business is highly competitive, but she said she sells all the ostrich products she receives.

Pat McFadden, president of the American Ostrich Association and a Wichita, Kan., ostrich rancher, said the U.S. ostrich industry is small, but on the upswing.

## **`GETTING BETTER'**

``It is getting better every year. More and more people are wanting the meat and the oil," said McFadden, who cautions it is not a ``get-rich-quick scheme."

Calder, he said, is one of the few early ranchers who has stuck it out.

Far from a stereotypical rancher, Calder still sells real estate, although now in Palm Beach with the Corcoran Group. Her New York friends jokingly say she's ``Miss High Heels goes farming."

On a recent Saturday she wore a pair of gold-toned flats, plus comfortable slacks and a shirt. Still, her perfect hair, manicured red-polished nails and a look that some have compared to Ginger Rogers is more Palm Beach than Loxahatchee.

But Calder, who is divorced, knows just about everything about the birds. Their tennis ball-sized eyes are similar to humans' and they can detect color. ``They hate red. We could not have a red lawn mower on the property," she said.

Nearby, the graceful, perky birds watch as visitors approach. It's breeding season, and they're more territorial than usual.

Bob's normally bluish neck, legs and beak are red because of the hormones rushing through him. Although he may appear to be just a big bird on spindly legs, he can deliver a forward kick with 500 pounds of pressure per square inch.

``They're the most amazing animals. They can outrun a horse," Calder said.

## **ALL-NATURAL MEAT**

Her firm belief in ostrich meat's healthfulness keeps her in the business.

``I feel the market is ready to embrace this alternative red meat, not only for its delicious taste, but for health reasons," Calder said.

Ostrich is a low-calorie product with no saturated fat, she said. Blue Heaven's products also are all-natural, hormone- and antibiotic-free as well as free-range.

Doug Bush, sales manager at West Palm Beach meatpacking and distribution company Bush Brothers Provision Co., said the ostrich meat category has experienced growth in recent years, but is not anywhere close to what it was in the '90s.

``Ostrich is a very healthful alternative," he said. ``We buy and sell a fairly large amount."

At the Gander Mountain outdoor store's restaurant, Tall Tales Real Food, in Palm Beach Gardens, the char-grilled ostrich burger, \$13.95, is available twice a week, restaurant manager Karen McMichael said.

``I had a young boy order it just yesterday, and he loved it," McMichael said.

Calder wants ostrich meat's growth spurt to continue. She said that with many ranchers in their

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50s and 60s, young people are needed. She'd like to start a school for people to learn the many aspects of ostrich ranching.

“Ostrich meat can feed the world,” she said.

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