

Investigating marketing strategies and consumption of ostrich meat in Birmingham, UK

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Introduction

The ostrich is a unique animal that has been successfully domesticated due to a productive demand for its healthy, low fat meat and high quality (Cooper, 1999), durable leather (Cooper, 2001). Currently the animal is farmed widely in Africa and certain countries in Europe, Australia and America. In the UK, following their introduction in the late 1980s, ostrich farming became a very profitable enterprise growing to approximately 20,000 birds until the industry was beset by an unfortunate scandal amongst investing companies in 1995 and declined. The British Domesticated Ostrich Association (BDOA) was founded in December 1992 to support the development of the industry and established links with DEFRA in London and its equivalents in Edinburgh and Belfast, and maintains contact with the EU and the Council of Europe in matters that affect the industry. Entrants to the industry included traditional farmers looking to diversify; investment companies; and entrants with limited agricultural experience. Currently, a few farms remain equipped with their own slaughter and meat processing facilities. Of 12 registered ostrich production facilities on the BDOA website, nine (75%) sell meat. An emergent threat, the decline in small retail businesses and growth of supermarket chains, has forced increasing efficiencies on mainstream livestock producers, resulting in greater pressure on the development of small producers in order to create new operations. In order to achieve this aim successfully, British producers have had to find effective ways of developing marketing strategies to sell their meat and skins. The aim of the current investigation, therefore, was to explore the current marketing strategies used in Birmingham by ostrich farmers to successfully sell their meat to the public.

Notes on current marketing strategies

An investigation into the various marketing strategies was gathered by contacting BDOA, and three ostrich producers in Britain by email. Unique selling points and methods used to promote meat cuts were noted and described.

Ostrich meat is an expensive, albeit healthy alternative to other red meats and is currently marketed in the UK as vacuum-packed prime steak (range: £15.88-18.00/kg), rump steak (range: £12.02-17.85/kg), premier fillet (£18.50-22.50/kg) and gourmet fan fillet (£17.79-20.50/kg); burgers (range: £8.43-10.26/kg); sausages (range: £8.33-8.49/kg); steak mince (£7.00-8.25/kg); biltong (range: £56.20-60.00/kg); smoked (range: £27.95-49.90/kg). Each farm has its unique product offerings including whole fillet (£14.26/kg); dicing steak (£7.20/kg); griddle steak and fillet escallops (POA); stir-fry steak (£17.50/kg); casserole (£6.50/kg); sandwich steak (£13.99/kg); a variety of sausages (ostrich and leak, ostrich Cumberland, and ostrich with apricot and cider) (£8.49/kg); ostrich and red wine pies (£1.95 each); ostrich ham (£14.99/kg); and ostrich pasty (£1.95 each). There is some offer of a discount on delivery charges with the discount increasing with the total price paid. One farm offered free delivery for orders over £225.

Farms in the UK have both on-site shops and mobile units that sell meat. The mobile units travel to different locations in a calendar month (approximately 18). Orders can also be purchased directly on line and shipped to one's door. Recipes are offered to customers to

help them prepare meat to maximise its taste. Recipes offered on line are promoted through the low calorie value of the meat of 97, compared with chicken, which has 140. Recipes include ostrich winter casserole; ostrich and plum casserole; smoked ostrich; Barolo poached ostrich fillet with celeriac puree; simple pan fried ostrich; ostrich fillet steaks with nutmeg creamed spinach; ostrich steaks in orange glaze with kiwi fruit; char grilled ostrich steak served with voisin potatoes and Crowns® own balsamic cream sauce; and ostrich stir fry. Ostrich fillet and burger nutritional values are given. There are some value-added benefits that could be utilised in an effective marketing campaign, including: flavour (distinct, iron-meaty taste); colour (dark-cherry red); tenderness (drier with low collagen content); pH (>6 with high water binding capacity); fat (low calorific value 0.43 kJ/100g); sodium (low 43mg/100g); and iron (high 2.3 mg/100g). There may be a mismatch in the promotion of ostrich meat as having low cholesterol content (57 mg/100g) as this is not dissimilar from chicken and higher than turkey. A greater emphasis on its low fat content will create a unique selling point.

The nutritional benefits of ostrich meat on the websites are well promoted in tabulated form comparing the nutrient composition of ostrich with beef, veal, pork, chicken, turkey and lamb. The websites are easy to follow and are supported by very useful pictures and comparative price lists.

Investigation into the meat consumption preferences of the Birmingham public

Birmingham is a city with a popular meat and wholesale market located in Digbeth. The main days for sale include Friday and Saturday. A questionnaire was designed to test the perceptions of the public within the vicinity of the market on their perceptions of ostrich meat. Questioning in the form of unstructured, non-recorded interviews of the general British public (n = 380) demonstrated that they are mostly ignorant of the existence of ostrich meat and in most cases, revulsion and/or surprise resulted when they heard the word ostrich. Of the total, 85% responded “no” that they had never heard of ostrich meat; 64% indicated that price is a major factor in its purchase; and 52% said that they would be willing to taste the meat. Many respondents (58%) regarded the ostrich as a “dirty” animal.

Discussion

From the results obtained from the survey, albeit limited, the British public in Birmingham do not rate ostrich meat highly and it clearly does not fit in with traditional British roasts (lamb, duck, beef, chicken, etc.). Such ignorance is a huge milestone to shift and advocates effective marketing strategies and guarantee labels. It is unfortunate that the British government is not interested in promoting healthy red meats, seemingly more interested in pumping the domestic market with affordable, fatty meats like pork and chicken. It is suggested that more posters be used in schools, supermarkets and farmers’ markets with labels guaranteeing quality. I am not advocating eating ostrich meat everyday – only on occasions. The meat is 100% hormone, steroid and antibiotic free; there are no biochemical additives; the meat is fresh; it is vacuum packed to ensure freshness, flavour and taste; each meat cut is hand prepared and trimmed; it has all the succulent and juicy flavours of beef, but is 99% fat-free and has 60% less calories; and there is no shrinkage during cooking. The low fat content of ostrich meat means it is healthy meat. The necessity of adequate care (rearing, nutrition and hygiene), handling and slaughter techniques of ostriches are essential for prolonging the shelf life of the meat. The brand name, packaging and presentation of ostrich meat are vital elements of successful product differentiation in the British meat market.

Evidence in the literature which can be used to promote ostrich meat to buyers, suggests that apart from the standard ostrich meat cuts, liver can be stored vacuum-packed with minimal changes in colour perception. In air-packed samples, high levels of odours were detected during the first 6 days of storage whereas livers stored under anaerobic conditions (vacuum and modified atmosphere – 80% CO₂ + 20% N₂), odours were not perceived (Fernandez-Lopez et al., 2006). Ground ostrich meat reaches below saleable quality in less

than six days (Seydim et al., 2006). It is beneficial to a supermarket to sell ostrich meat as the short shelf life of this product means there should be established rapid means for its promotion and sale. Indeed, the maximum shelf-life time is 12 days for vacuum packed meat at 4°C (González-Montalvo et al., 2007). Samples of vacuum-packed meat stored at 4°C have the lowest microbial loads at day 9 (Capita et al., 2006). Burgers formulated with 100% ostrich meat or mixing ostrich and beef had the highest quality scores, whereas ostrich and pork meat mixes had the highest oxidation rate (Fernández-López et al., 2006). Ostrich muscles attain a higher pH throughout the post-mortem storage and may have a greater risk of microbial spoilage; however, both hot-deboned and cold-deboned ostrich muscles are suitable for export after aging for 42 days (Botha et al., 2006).

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