
FROM GOOD LAND

BY MICHELLE MYERS

NATIVE BIRD

Far from dead, Long Island duck flourishes.



AQUEBOGUE—These are tough times for the Long Island duck industry. At one time more than 70 duck farms flourished in Suffolk County. Now there are three—the Jurgielewicz farm in Moriches, the Massey farm in Eastport, and the largest of them all, Crescent Duck Farm in Aquebogue.

Crescent supplies about four percent of the nation's duck—one out of every 25 birds that might become Pekin duck in some American Chinatown or a cassoulet at a high-end French restaurant. Crescent is the not only the largest of the remaining duck operations

out here but is also the only one that still breeds its own ducks, continually trying to improve its product. That, says owner Doug Corwin, has been one of the secrets of Crescent's success, not to mention the fact he won't sell breeding stock to anyone. "That would be suicide."

Certainly, Crescent duck breast has a reputation for being meatier and more flavorful than its rivals, who are now mostly located in the Midwest. (Unless the duck has been on Long Island at some point in its life, it gets called "Long Island-style." The other remaining producers on the Island bring in some or most of their product from Ohio and process it here to gain the coveted "Long Island duck" label.) What does Corwin look for in the ideal duck? "The breast should be long, flat and wide—about six inches wide and a good few inches thick," he said as he cradled a strangely calm duck in his wide hands. "Thigh and breast—that's where we want the meat."

One month out of three, the operation concentrates on singling out good breeding birds.

The process is a mixture of science—ultrasound techniques and health examinations among them—and good old fashioned eyeballing. The way the potential breeding duck is feathered is all-important, since it helps determine the number of eggs she may lay and how many of those eggs will hatch. "We also want to promote meat characteristics in the female line," said Corwin. A good breeder is usually selected at four weeks of age and will first breed at around 25 weeks of age in an outside pen where there is one male for every five females.



Corwins have owned this tract of land since they arrived in the 1600s. The land was never cultivated and the Corwin men earned a living as carpenters. A number of early settlers like the Hallocks and the Wells bought similar tracts that stretched from the bay to the sound. Corwin says the marshlands provided useful plant materials that could be used for thatch, for example, but little else until the fortuitous arrival of some Pekin duck eggs from China in the late 19th century hatched the Long Island duck industry. (The apocryphal story claims that an American businessman traveling in China mistook the large ducks were miniature geese and thought they might be a novelty in the States.) Great grandfather Henry Corwin took up duck farming at the beginning of the 20th century in the wake of a number of other duck farms that had been established in the Riverhead area and would later give way to an industry famous throughout the nation.

Long Island duck became a household name, benefiting partly from some unique characteristics of Suffolk County that were particularly conducive to the duck business. First, says Corwin, it's a

wonderful growing climate. "We never have a really hard freeze, summers are generally not tremendously hot, and we have ground water." And then there's the history. Corwin has certainly had plenty of practice in the duck business, not to mention the sage advice of his father (still at work at the age of 75). Beneath its high-tech veneer, Crescent remains a family business that includes Corwin's brother and sons as well.

Corwin raises only Pekin ducks, who breed lasciviously and mature rapidly. In fact, 97 percent of ducks raised for the table are the Pekin variety. Besides the quality of the meat, which is low in fat and, in that sense, compares very favorably with chicken breast, Pekins cannot fly, which makes the farmer's life much easier. The other varieties like Muscovy and Moulard (a cross between a Pekin and a Muscovy and raised primarily for the production of foie gras) are much gamier and produce copious fat. Crescent works on a six-week cycle from "hatch

Doug Corwin among his birds—in the breeding pen (opposite) and in front of the incubating closets (above) that hold drawers of chicks ready to hatch (below).



RECIPE

ASIAN LACQUERED DUCK Salamander's, Greenport

1 4½ lb. duckling	2 cinnamon sticks
2 gl. water	6 slices ginger
6 star anise	orange zest
1 T. coriander seed	3 c. of honey
1 T. black pepper	2 c. salt

Boil the seasonings in the water for 10 minutes. Cool completely. Remove the excess skin and fat from duck and prick the skin with a fork on the sides and bottom. Submerge the duck (or more than one duck) completely. Brine for 2-4 days in the refrigerator.

Seasoning paste (for each duck):	1 T. sesame paste
2 cloves garlic	½ c. honey
1 T. grated ginger	4 T. soy sauce
1 T. hoisin sauce	salt and black pepper

Make a paste with a mortar and pestle or grind in a blender. Dry the duck completely and rub with the paste inside and out. First roast breast-side down for 45 minutes at 375 degrees, then right-side up for 45 minutes at 375 degrees, basting with more seasoning paste for color.



to dispatch.” The newborn ducks live in specially constructed and temperature controlled duck barns, where they consume 400 tons of feed each week. “We make our own feed [a combination of corn, soybeans, and lesser amounts of wheat, vitamins and minerals, and alfalfa], which keeps costs down,” said Corwin. “Feed and the cost of land are two of the reasons duck farming has become prohibitively expensive out here.”

Another reason is strict environmental regulations that politicians and citizens have developed over the last 40 years. The same gluttonous appetite that makes ducks great for raising also means they generate massive amounts of waste. Over the years, the streams that had proved so beneficial for the raising of ducks became badly polluted with duck waste, which eventually flowed into the bays, prompting the County and State to implement strict environmental regulations that put most producers out of business.

Duck farming peaked on Long Island in the 1940s at just about the same time that duck growers petitioned Cornell University for its assistance in conducting scientific research into duck nutrition, disease and management. The Duck Research Laboratory was estab-

lished in Eastport, Long Island, in 1949. Corwin remembers two dozen duck farms within a ten-mile radius of Aquebogue through the 1950s. By the early 1990s, however, local membership had declined and the cooperative had opened its doors to national and international members. In 1992 the organization’s name was changed to the International Duck Research Cooperative, reflecting the spread of duck farming to the Midwest and Canada.

Crescent is fortunate to have 140 acres on which to raise its product. There are barns for every phase of the product cycle. Corwin would like to replace the hatcheries with a more modern facility. Indeed, some of the barns have been around a long time, including one that was constructed with timber salvaged from the Second Avenue elevated train. The spread includes plenty of space for young



ducks to range, but the ducks’ outdoor days are numbered. The threat of avian flu has accelerated a barn-building program that will house all of the farm’s ducks inside. “If the flu strain is found in North America, I’ll get them inside even if the buildings are incomplete,” says Corwin.

Despite the possibility of a more limited existence for the birds, the farm’s prospects are ripe. Crescent ducks are shipped all over the United States and are found on the menus of some of the most highly rated restaurants in the country. The farm does its own shipping up and down the northeast corridor—which, like raising its own feed, has been an important part of keeping costs down. It contracts out shipping to its more remote markets, like Hawaii. “I’d rather be big in the Northeast than spread too thin,” said Corwin. From Cromer’s Market in Sag Harbor to Greenport’s restaurant row, Crescent supplies most of the duck on the East End.

And how does Corwin like his product? “Throw a breast on the grill skin-on or skin-off, three to four minutes each side, a little pepper and salt,” said Corwin. “Eat it like a steak.” □