If it looks like an ostrich, runs like one and lives in Acadiana

**IT'S PROBABLY AN EMU**

By Judy Stanford
Staff Writer

Cleo makes a drumming noise, acknowledging her mate, Caesar. Meanwhile, Popeye and Olive Oyl circle around one another in an adjoining pen and on the other side, Archie and Edith strut around, seemingly oblivious to the light drizzle that has begun to fall.

These names, taken from history and popular culture, all belong to emus, breeders living in the back yard of Terilla Palmer, and her husband, Peck.

Although emu meat is not currently available in supermarkets, or even gourmet shops, there is a growing market for emu chicks and breeder pairs.

The emu is a native of Australia. It is part of the family of flightless birds to which the ostrich belongs.

With its neck fully extended, a mature emu stands about six feet tall and weighs in the neighborhood of 150 pounds. The hens begin laying at about two to three years of age, lay from 20 to 50 eggs in a laying season and remain productive for about 20 years.

The Palms got into the emu business after moving back home to Louisiana from Victoria, Texas when Peck Palmer was laid off from his job in the oilfield.

"My brother told me about a rodeo in Texas, where they had had an emu," Palmer said. "And I said, "What's an emu?"

Later the couple would find an article in the newspaper advertising emus for sale.

"The chicks were $1,000 apiece," Palmer said. "Neither of us had a job and we didn't have much money to invest."

They decided to buy a pair of chicks and a pair of yearlings, which were $4,200 a pair.

A week later, the couple decided to buy another pair of yearlings. "The price had jumped up to $6,500 a week's time," said Palmer.

Emus in Australia live in the wild, traveling from 20 to 50 miles a day to forage for food. They can sprint short distances at a rate of about 40 miles an hour.

They are so common there that birds of wild emu have been known to stampede, breaking down farmers' fences and trampling their crops.

A breeder pair in Australia goes for about $200. "To them, it's like chickens in the yard," Palmer said.

In this country, emus are pampered and protected. And with good reason. A proven good breeder pair can go for as much as $30,000 to $50,000.

The Palms are a hatched in incubators in a room of their home.

The green, leathery eggs are patiently tended until the eighth to 10-inch hatching pecks its way to freedom. At hatching, the chick weighs about 450 grams, Palmer said — about one pound.

At about two days of age, the chicks are moved to smaller pens behind the house. Each set of chicks has its own "run" outside the pens for exercise. Hobbies are placed on the chicks' ankles to keep them from developing deformities, like splayed legs or knock knees. "If you hobble them for four to six days," Palmer said, "it'll keep their legs straight."

"Palmer holds a green, leathery emu egg and day-old hatchling.

In the wild, these deformities would hinder the emu from keeping up with the herd. They would soon either die from starvation or fall to a faster predator.

In captivity, where the emus are given a bird feed formulated especially for them, and are inoculated against disease — and in the case of the Palms' birds, fed vitamin supplements — the deformity would drastically drive down their value as saleable stock.

Proponents of emus as a food source point to the fact that little of the bird goes to waste. "You can use the whole bird," said Palmer.

Of its 150 pounds, the emu yields about 40 pounds of meat and 40 pounds of fat. "That makes about three liters of oil," said Palmer. "It's used in cosmetics and pharmaceuticals."

Palmer said the feathers of the emu are used in costumes; the hide is used for leather goods, like purses; the tomenails are used for jewelry and the leg hide is used for shoes.

The meat of the emu is tender and tasty, more resembling beef than poultry in taste and texture. It is also lower in cholesterol than chicken, turkey or catfish, according to the American Emu Association.

There is no market right now for this meat, because there simply are not enough birds in the country to begin large-scale production.

"We'll have to have 5 billion birds to begin the commercial market, and once we go out onto the market," Palmer said, "we'll have to continue with it. We can't make the meat today and not have it tomorrow."

Although there are only about 12,000 emus in the country today, the American Emu Association predicts that emu ranchers will be ready to go to market in about five years.