

From Pennsylvania To Chinatown

Start-To-Finish Duck Operation Supplies East Coast Oriental Markets

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SHARTLESVILLE (Berks Co.) — Tucked amidst green rolling hills in Berks County, at the end of an unpaved lane, lies long white barns typically seen on poultry farms.

Inside the barns, a scattering of white downy feathers lie on the floor, red plastic waterers hang from the ceiling, and long rows of ventilation openings are also present, typical of a poultry farm.

If you were expecting chickens, however, you will be surprised

when you take a second look into the open ends of the barn.

Ducks are the feature of the Joe Jurgielewicz & Son Duck Farm, a supplier for Oriental markets in several major East Coast cities.

The host of recent agribusiness tours that include a tour for county school superintendents, and later for economic development representatives, the start-to-finish operation is the source of ducks for Chinatowns in Philadelphia, New York City, Washington, D.C., Boston, and Baltimore.

Bronislaw Jurgielwicz began the operation in Long Island, N.Y. Later his son, Joseph Jurgielewicz, Sr., relocated the operation, Joe Jurgielewicz & Son Ltd., to Berks County. At that time the business included his son, Dr. Joseph Jurgielewicz, the third generation of the family to oversee the production and distribution company.

The business, which has over 100 employees, also includes the efforts of 20 duck growers in Pennsylvania, most of them growing an average of more than 4,000 ducks every two weeks.

Five layer houses, each holding approximately 4,200 ducks apiece, produce over two million baby ducks each year.

To start the layer flock, the ducks move from the "developer" stage to the layer stage (moving to the layer house) at 26-27 weeks old. They will lay for approximately six months then will be replaced by another flock.

The layers perform best in an unconfined situation, since "you can't confine a duck like you can a chicken," said Michael Werner, environmental coordinator. Consequently the ducks have free range of the long barns that include a laying area with sections of boxes and a raised area with a nipple watering system.

Fresh straw is distributed in the barn each day. After each flock, which is rotated after six months, the house is cleaned out. The litter and manure is either distributed on the company's 240 tillable acres or on nearby farms.

The fertilization rate is over 90 percent, said Werner. Of that 90 percent of fertilized eggs, 75-80 percent will hatch. There is one drake for every five hens.

The eggs are hand-gathered twice each morning beginning at 6 a.m. and then again to "get the stragglers," said Werner, since "most of them lay the eggs in the early morning."

Next they are moved to a 60-degree cooler for up to two days before entering one of the 28 incubators used on the operation. Each incubator can hold 9,000 eggs. The eggs stay in their rainforest environment — approximately 99.5 degrees and 99 percent humidity — for 25 days. The high humidity keeps the ducklings from sticking to the egg shell. In the final three days the eggs are moved to a hatching tray and moved to a cooler incubator.

The farm hatches four days a week, as "we can hatch all we need in those four days," said Werner.

Next the ducklings are loaded onto trucks and taken to a grower or one of three four-stage houses on the premises.

The farm produces Peking ducks, the preferred breed of the Oriental market.

Besides layer houses, the company has grower houses on the property. The houses, which hold between 4,200-4,500 ducks, are divided into four rooms with the same amount of ducks in each room.

The birds are grown in four-stage houses. "They go in one end as babies and come out at seven weeks ready for processing," said Werner.

These ducks, like the layers, are not confined in cages "because of their lifestyle," said Dr. Jurgielewicz. "Being a waterfowl they need more room," he said.



Mike Werner, environmental coordinator, stands in one of the grower houses.



The ducklings hatch after 28 days in 99 degree heat.



The ducks are unconfined in the layer house. Most of the eggs are laid and collected in the morning.



An employee sets the eggs on a tray which will be moved to a 60-degree cooler before their move to the incubator. The extra eggs are sent to Oriental markets in nearby East Coast cities.

"They're also a bigger bird, so they get approximately double the space that chickens get."

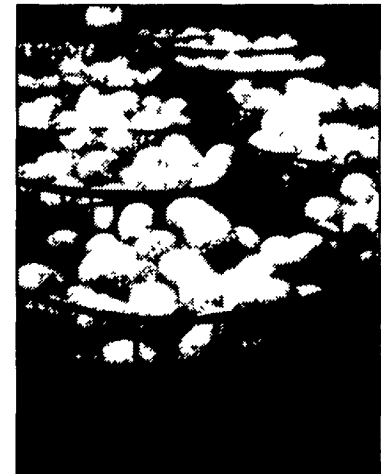
The youngest ducklings fill the first and smallest room with their high-pitched whistles. They are herded after approximately two weeks to the next room, a progression that ends in the last room, where they leave at seven weeks of age and weigh 6-7 pounds.

By this time their whistle has evolved to a full-fledged quack. They receive differently formulated food at each stage.

"The nutritional demands change just like any kind of a baby," said Dr. Joseph Jurgielewicz Jr., company president and veterinarian of the business.

"They get a high-density formula when they start, and as they get older they don't need high-density feed, so the quality of the feed would decrease as the bird gets older."

The feed is also varied with the season. Since the birds will eat



The eggs are collected twice each morning in baskets of 100 eggs per basket.

less in summer weather, the feed is fortified so that the little food that they do get gives them enough nutrients. The feed is a corn soybean mix with other nutrients.

The structure of a duck's bill, which prohibits the fowl from eating mash, also means a higher-priced feed. Additionally there is an increase over chickens in processing costs "because it's so much harder to get feathers off waterfowl — they're just tighter. Combining these elements with the increase in square footage necessary means a more expensive meat than chicken," said Dr. Jurgielewicz.

The operation includes a slaughter facility, also. There the ducks are processed fresh and frozen for market. The brand

"Keystone Katie" is sold to mostly to Oriental markets and the "Bay Brand" variety goes to more conventional markets that prefer that the head and feet are removed.

The birds may be eviscerated or intact as dictated by the buyers in each market. The facility also prepare kosher ducks.

Although most of the process is completed by hand, each duck is weighed and sorted by computer so the same ducks of the same weight will be packed in the same box.

"When they cook duck, they may cook several at once and they want them all to be done at the same time," said Werner.

The skin quality of a duckling is very important because of the way the Oriental chefs present the duck for sale. Their cooking methods leave little fat on the bird by the time it is ready for consumption, according to Werner.

According to HACCP plans, the ducks must be either chilled to 40 degrees or in the freezer six hours after they are killed, he said.

A full-time USDA inspector checks the ducks for wholesomeness, enforces the HACCP plan, and is in charge of sanitation. A USDA grader grades the ducks to ensure quality and ensure that it is an "A" grade product.

The ducks are delivered fresh or frozen six days a week on company-owned trucks. The business uses outside hauling, Stoltzfus Trucking Brokerage, for long-distance customers.

As for the future of the business, "we're leaning toward staying in that niche market," according to Dr. Jurgielewicz. "We're a sales-oriented company. Our production numbers will increase as dictated by our sales."

"This is a truly unique business are in," said Paul Steinmetz, director of operations. "We are start-to-finish operation. Our customers tell us what their needs are and we do everything we can to accommodate them in a timely and efficient manner."

"The cornerstone of any successful business is their employees," continued Steinmetz. "We are very fortunate to have dedicated, hardworking people on all levels and in all areas working for us."

"We have experienced significant growth over the last five years and I feel that as long as we stay on top of all the issues involved with that growth Joe Jurgielewicz & Son will have a bright and exciting future."