

Holiday chefs no longer flock to geese

By Bill Lindelof
BEE STAFF WRITER

It was the end and the beginning for the Christmas goose.

Grimaud Farms in Stockton began their annual processing of the long-necked birds Friday, marking the end of the line for 600 Embden geese.

But their timely death also marked the beginning of fresh geese available for the holiday, a tradition that is not

quite what it used to be.

Before turkey, prime rib and vegan nut loaf crowded onto the holiday table, a big, fat goose was synonymous with the yuletide.

Through the ages, from Scandinavia to Ireland to the United States, the bird has been a holiday staple. But over the years, the goose became less popular, owing perhaps to its fatty carcass and the ready availability of tur-

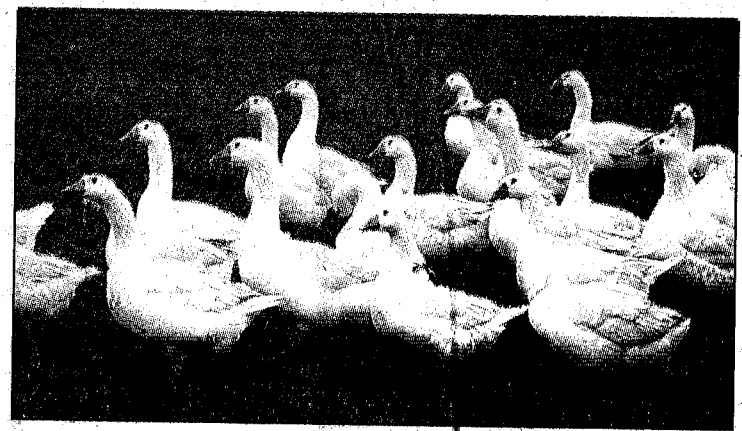
key.

Ralph Ernst, a professor of animal science at the University of California, Davis, raised 3,000 geese when he lived in Michigan. He also ate a few.

"Personally I don't like the meat as well," Ernst said. "It's pretty fat compared with turkey, and it is virtually all dark meat."

Noted butcher, television cooking

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The Embden is one of 12 varieties of geese raised at Metzer Farms near Salinas. Metzer considers the birds' meat fatty, but "they are cooked in most of its dishes."

Special to The Bee
John Metzer

Goose: Once billed as 'festive bird' of England

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expert, author and newspaper columnist Merle Ellis fondly remembered the goose of his childhood, roasted crisp with apple-gooseberry stuffing.

And alongside was "Bubble and Squeak," potato pancakes fried in goose grease.

"If you see one goose in the meat case, it is unusual," he said. "Geese are not as popular as once they were and probably never will be again."

When he was a boy, Ellis' aunts in Nebraska raised geese.

"I hated those geese because there was one gander that always chased me out in the yard," he said. "Geese were used as guards in ancient times. I always loved Christmas dinner because I imagined I was eating that particular goose."

Ellis wrote about the goose's place in history this way:

"The goose, it is said, became the 'festive bird' of England in 1588 as a result of the sinking of the Spanish Armada. Queen Elizabeth I was eating goose at a banquet when she learned the good news and gleefully declared the goose the official bird of celebration."

In America, early settlers relied on flocks of geese for survival, Ellis said. He lamented one byproduct of geese: goose grease mixed with spirits of camphor, a medicinal concoction that was smeared on the chest of children with sniffles.

Grimaud Farms of California processes about 2,000 geese for the Christmas season.

"We don't do a lot, but there is a small market," said Claude Bigo, president of Grimaud Farms. "You will find frozen birds in the supermarket for Christmas. But we do strictly fresh ones for Whole Foods," a large retailer of natural and organic foods.

A fresh Grimaud goose can also be ordered through Corti Brothers market, 5810 Folsom

Bldv. This year the Grimaud geese will cost \$5.99 a pound at Corti's.

The 10- to 11-pound geese must be picked up by the Friday before Christmas. Frozen geese, which do not have to be ordered ahead, are also available at Corti and other markets.

"Geese actually cook themselves," said Darrell Corti. "They are for those who do not know how to cook. You just plop them in the oven on a rack."

The Grimaud birds are raised at Metzger Farms in Gonzales, 18 miles south of Salinas. Metzger's main business is hatching and selling baby ducks and geese.

Grimaud "would like me to supply more (adult geese) but I don't have the space," said John Metzger. The Metzger birds are mainly fed a diet of lettuce, tomatoes, celery and onions.

"They are prestuffed," Metzger said jokingly. "This time of year there are not any vegetables to be feeding them so they are on a grain diet."

Metzger raises 12 different kinds of geese, kept in open pens. He supplies Grimaud with the white Embden, a large German goose and the main bird produced for goose meat in the United States.

He hasn't done much research on the Christmas goose. But he knows about the goose's not-so-lean reputation, having eaten plenty.

"It is all in how you cook them," he said. "Waterfowl naturally have more fat in them so they can swim around in water and not be cold. But if they are cooked right, most of that disappears."

He said a live, adult Embden costs about \$35 from Metzger's. So six geese a-laying would go for \$210 this year.

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