



My Experiments with the Emu This bird from Down Under has started making a special appearance on Indian restaurant menus ANOOTHI VISHAL

IT'S A bird known to sleep in spurts, standing up, and also to contemplate the vagaries of human life (no, that's not a joke; this bird is known to observe humans). It's been thought of as a primordial being, whose egg, Australian aborigines believed, thrown up into the sky, gave birth to the sun. So, it is rather strange to be toying with some skewered emu on my platter.

This bird is the latest exotic meat to have found its way onto restaurant plates in New Delhi. No less than a Page 3 party was held last month to launch the lean meat amid chefs and foodies of the city. And the bird is now available at select restaurants, including at designer Rohit Bal's F&B experiment Cibo. It is a tough meat to cook, this bird, Cibo's talented young chef Nishant Choubey tells me, taking many hours of marination and slow-

cooking to render it tender. But it is fetching enough when stuffed between sheets of lasagna, in a tortilla, even as boneless chunks in a bastardised *biryani* and yes, as skewered *kebabs* that the chef has now put in front of me.

The emu *kebabs*, or *tikkas* really, that I contemplate don't have that fowl feel to them. It may be because our friend, the bird itself, is no featherweight. Instead, as the second-largest bird in the world, it can and does outweigh many mammals. You can't compare it to the tastelessness of chicken at all. But it is not lamb (or, mutton) like either. As my strictly carnivorous husband saws through his emu steak, he compares it to, well, 'real steak', so tough to find in India and usually pricey if it is Wagyu or Kobe tenderloin. With emu, price is definitely less of a consideration, since it falls somewhere

between that for chicken and the dearer seafood and is much less than for other luxury, imported meat products. That this red meat is cholesterol-free may have its own advantages. But am I won over by this promoters' hardsell? The *tikkas* are to decide.

The accompanying kiwi fruit on my plate, a sweet touch to offset the BBQ sauce-coated, grilled chunks, is refreshing. And in perhaps a grave disappointment to the chef who has put together this recipe, I first go for the fruit, delaying the inevitable shock that must follow as I put the first morsel of this strange bird into my beak. At heart, I am quite definitely a chicken.

"If you can eat one animal, you should be able to eat every other," is my husband's unsolicited logic. But despite the perils of a profession as a food critic, squeamishness is hard to ig-



nore: I don't think I'd go in happily for the Roman *fritto misto* where bits of animal's innards are deep fried in batter and supposed to comprise a feast of love. (I'd rather settle for the comfort of the *pakora*-like seafood version).

I'd also never be able to hold down a snake or monkey brain or, God forbid, dog—even with the gun of a review to my head. And while other food writers may wax eloquent about 'peppery' red ant chutney from Chattisgarh, a tribal delicacy, the 'chicken-like' alligator meat from South African farms where the hide may go towards an Hermes handbag as the meat goes into the kitchen, and about the merits of kangaroo meat (with an adjective that should never be used in culinary copy—'nice'), some pleasures are best left untouched.

Strangely though, I do have the heart and palate for baby octopi (I adore them, simply blanched, in lemony salads), for snails (escargots baked in delicious buttery sauces that form half the lure of eating out in France), and even for a stew of the lapin, oh, that innocent disappearer-into-hats-and-holes and launcher of Alice-adventures. Besides, the likes of farm-bred Japanese quail, pork bellies and glazed ham, clams and mussels in curries and Mediterranean broth stir-fried scallops, elitist oysters, drool-worthy soft-shell crabs, not to mention duck and goose liver, are hardly culinary exotica today, appearing with great frequency on restaurant menus, holding scant terror nowadays of the kind they may have inspired in an earlier generation of metropolitan Indians.

Emu may well get there. Like the butterball turkey, bred in Gurgaon farms, whose stock has been running out on retail shelves every Christmas for the last couple of years. But it will be a while. It isn't as if the emu is popular on menus even in its native territory down under. Native Australians did use the meat for nourishment (and the oil for medicinal use), but it has never quite caught on as a gourmet choice.

Choubey, the first of emu experimenters in Delhi, says emu burgers, among other things, are common, including in the US, and these form the inspiration for his own patties and pizzas. But primarily, the farmed bird's use has been in pharma, where its oil is prized, and in the luxury goods industry, where its tough skin is used to make everything from handbags to footwear.

Surprisingly, it is a bird that is known even to Indian farmers, particularly in states like Maharashtra and Gujarat where farms have been breeding emus.

eateries. Tony da Dhaba on the Pune-Mumbai highway is perhaps the most celebrated of the lot, making use of an emu farm in the neighbourhood to rustle up its house speciality of emu *masala* and egg *bhurji*. One spiced-up scrambled egg costs Rs 1,200—and this at a *dhaba*—because an emu egg is no ordinary pebble in your ref. It weighs a solid 600-700 gm. Chennai, too, has restaurants allied to farms doing local emu meat recipes, and in Hyderabad, there exists an emu *biryani*, we are told, even though I didn't quite stumble upon it.



BIRDIE YUM YUM A tough meat to cook, emu is served as a gourmet dish in Delhi, while its egg is served scrambled at a *dhaba* on the Pune-Mumbai highway



primarily for trade purposes. In 1996, 100 birds were ostensibly flown in from Australia to Vijayawada for research, and it is these and their descendants that are still in circulation—the average life span of the bird being 25-30 years, according to young agro-entrepreneurs Rohan and Ashish Sinha of Tallbirdemu farm, who have been encouraging more farms to breed the bird for domestic industry use.

Ashish and Rohan have supplied these birds to over 100,000 farms in the last three years. But the real revelation for me is the fact that emu does exist on Indian menus that are considerably humbler than those in Delhi's chic

during my recent visit to the city.

In Delhi's fancier establishments, the meat will possibly be making an appearance soon enough, courtesy special food festivals. And Ashish and Rohan are toying with plans to put up the meat on retail shelves here too, before going to Kolkata with their promotional blitz.

Does that mean I have to like it? As the *tikka-kebab* goes down the gut, I find it is not really that offensive outside the imagination. On the other hand, it does have a faint liver-y aftertaste, not to my liking. I may not order it for myself the next time I am eating out. But perhaps I can be persuaded. It may be an acquired taste, after all. ■