

Outdoor breeding & collective housing: the best practices of the European foie gras sector

Providing quality living conditions for their animals is a daily concern of any breeder of fat palmipeds (ducks and geese) who must ensure their well-being, comfort and optimal hygiene and this at all stages of production. These elements are fundamental for the animals and a prerequisite to obtain a noble product of quality.

Living most of their life outside, palmipeds used for the production of foie gras live in collective cages for a few days during the fattening phase. Beyond the semantics and the negative connotation that can be attached to certain terms like *cage*, what matters to European foie gras breeders is the real conditions in which their animals are raised and the improvements that can be made.

The five European countries producing foie gras - Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Hungary and Spain - are subject to strict regulatory requirements in terms of animal health and welfare. Although currently producing 90% of worldwide foie gras, competition from other countries such as China, where standards are not as high as in the European Union, could increase in the coming decades.

Euro Foie Gras has always worked and will continue on this path to provide to palmipeds a housing system fully ensuring their well-being while meeting requirements related to sanitary aspects and offering satisfactory working conditions to the breeders.

An essentially outdoor production



The production of foie gras is an extensive, mostly outdoor production that is divided into two phases:

- **The rearing phase:** between 10 and 15 weeks depending on the species, waterfowl have access to an open-air run and can freely come and go from the building to the outside.
- **The fattening phase:** between 9 and 12 days for ducks and 12 to 15 days for geese on average, palmipeds are housed in collective cages in a building.

With 90% of the life of the animal spent outdoors, open air is a fundamental characteristic of the breeding of foie gras palmipeds. Breeders are proud of this particularity that they want to maintain despite the risks, requirements and necessary

adaptations that this entails (tools to avoid possible attacks by predators, strict biosecurity measures aimed at preventing and controlling health risks such as avian influenza, etc.). **This exceptional breeding method responds to strong consumer demand for quality poultry.**



Ducks of 2-3 days



Ducks of 2 weeks



Ducks of 4 weeks



Ducks of 10-11 weeks

Collective housing in accordance with the Recommendation of the Council of Europe of 22 June 1999

At the cost of substantial investments, the European waterfowl sector has changed all its equipment in response to the Recommendation of 22 June 1999¹ of the Council of Europe. Thus, all individual cages – *épinettes* - have been replaced **by collective cages meeting all the requirements laid down in the Recommendation** which states that:

¹ Recommendation concerning muscovy ducks hybrids of muscovy and domestic ducks
https://www.coe.int/t/e/legal_affairs/legal_co-operation/biological_safety_and_use_of_animals/farming/Rec%20Muscovy%20ducks%20E%201999.asp

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- « Housing systems for ducks shall allow the birds to:
- stand with a normal posture,
 - turn around without difficulty,
 - defecate showing normal movements,
 - flap the wings,
 - show normal preening movements,
 - perform normal social interactions,
- carry out normal feeding and drinking movements. »

Thanks to research, technical progress has been made to ensure that the housing system meets **animal welfare requirements, sanitary imperatives and the ergonomics of the farmer's work while achieving excellence in production** : improvement in equipment, study of optimal dimensions for animals, while allowing the operator who feeds them to make a safe gesture, etc. Euro Foie Gras points out that the progress made, thanks in particular to the research work, has made it possible to halve the duration of the fattening phase, and therefore the time spent by waterfowl in collective cages.

Individual cages - *épinettes* - no longer exist in Europe.



Collective cages are being used.



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Euro Foie Gras recalls that European producers of foie gras are subject to **Council Directive 98/58/EC**² on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes and as such are subject to regular checks. In its **report of 8 September 2016 on the implementation of this Directive**³, the European Commission concluded “*Though there have been complaints on other animal welfare issues such as the production of foie gras, transport and welfare at slaughter, numbers remain low for each topic. All complaints have been closely assessed and it has been concluded that there were not sufficient grounds to proceed in any of them.*” The European Commission also carries out audit missions on the management of sanitary risks by the competent national authorities (avian influenza in particular).

A proactive sector

Proactively, the five European countries producing foie gras adopted in 2011 the European Charter on breeding of waterfowl for foie gras⁴. This Charter sets out the commitments of the sector based on the 12 principles of the European Commission's "Welfare Quality Project". Among the principles governing the farming of fat palmipeds, it is stipulated that «*During the fattening phase, the animals should dispose of enough space to make natural movements that are required for their needs.*» (Article 5) or that «*the buildings shall be ventilated and, if necessary, with controlled temperature. The air quality and circulation (temperature, humidity and flow) shall be continually maintained to protect the animals' comfort.*» (Article 4)

At the national level, this proactive approach comes in different ways, with breeders being subject to requirements or initiatives that go beyond European standards. In **Belgium, the Royal Decree of 1994, modified in 2010**⁵ and controlled by the public authorities, enacts specific obligations relating to the housing system of fat palmipeds in terms of density and space. In **France, the voluntary approach « Palmi G confidence »**⁶ launched and led by the sector, aims to guarantee and certify the good practices of the breeders with regard to animal welfare. With a set of specifications controlled by an independent body, this approach is part of an ethical and professional approach through which breeders affirm their desire for transparency and continuous improvement. In **Hungary**, the Hungarian Poultry Council adopted in 2011 a **Code of Good Practice for the waterfowl sector**⁷.

² COUNCIL DIRECTIVE 98/58/EC of 20 July 1998 concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:31998L0058&from=FR>

³ REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL on the implementation of Council Directive 98/58/EC concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0558&from=FR>

⁴ European Charter on breeding of waterfowl for foie gras http://www.eurofoiegras.com/docs/EUROFOIEGRAS_CHARTE_UK.pdf

⁵ Royal decree of 1994 on the protection and welfare of the animals modified in 2010 <http://environnement.wallonie.be/legis/bienetreanimal/bienetre045.html>

⁶ The « Palmi G confidence » approach, which is in the implementing phase, brings together 15 organisations representing almost 90% of the sector.

<http://elevage-gavage.fr/le-foie-gras/les-engagements>

⁷ Code of good practice for the waterfowl sector

http://www.mbt.hu/mediatar/fajlok/regebbi_fajlok/btt_kodex_kesz

If you want to visit a farm producing foie gras and have an experience on the ground, do not hesitate to contact us using our contact form at the following link:
<http://www.eurofoiegras.com/fr/contact/1>

Meanwhile, the video accessible on this link will make you discover the production of foie gras in a farm in Belgium: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dki60-IN8Ug> - or in France : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FY_JSw_VgHo

Created in 2008, Euro Foie Gras, the European Federation of Foie Gras, brings together producers' federations from France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Spain and Hungary. Its goal is to establish a continuous exchange of good practices, know-how and promote the profession of foie gras producer.

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