



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

The rearing of fat palmipeds (ducks and geese) is extensive, very often family-run, and mostly in open air. With 90% of the animal's life spent outdoors, the palmipeds live in collective housing only during the fattening phase and for a limited period between 9 and 15 days depending on the species.

In the five European producing countries - Belgium, Bulgaria, Spain, Hungary and France - fat palmipeds farmers are subject to strict regulatory requirements and controls in terms of animal health and welfare, including the European Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes.

Euro Foie Gras has always worked and will continue to work so that fat palmipeds are reared in optimal conditions by fully ensuring their well-being while meeting requirements related to sanitary aspects and offering satisfactory working conditions to 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 housing 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. This exceptional breeding

EUROPEAN FEDERATION OF FOIE GRAS - EURO FOIE GRAS ASBL

31, Rue Montoyer- B-1000 BRUXELLES

<http://www.eurofoiegras.com/en/>

For more information :

Mélanie LAMAISON, Cynthia BENITES, Aliénor

melanie.lamaison@alienor.eu; cynthia.benites@alienor.eu

method **responds to a growing consumer demand** for quality products and has some environmental advantages such as low energy consumption or the possibility of developing agroecological practices in outdoor areas such as agroforestry. Consequently, this contributes to the **environmental sustainability** of the sector. Breeders are proud of this particularity of being an essentially outdoor production and they want to maintain it despite the risks, requirements and necessary adaptations that this entails (tools to avoid possible attacks by predators, strict biosecurity measures, etc.).



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 a cost of €120 million, the European waterfowl sector has changed all its equipment in response to the recommendation of 22 June 1999¹ of the Council of Europe. Thus, since 2010, the sector no longer uses cages because all individual cages – *épinettes* - have been replaced **by collective housing meeting all the requirements laid down in the recommendation** which states that:

¹ Recommendation concerning muscovy ducks hybrids of muscovy and domestic ducks adopted by the Standing Committee on 22 June 1999:

https://www.coe.int/t/e/legal_affairs/legal_co-operation/biological_safety_and_use_of_animals/farming/Rec%20Muscovy%20ducks%20E%201999.asp

« 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 housing.

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



**Collective housing is
being used.**



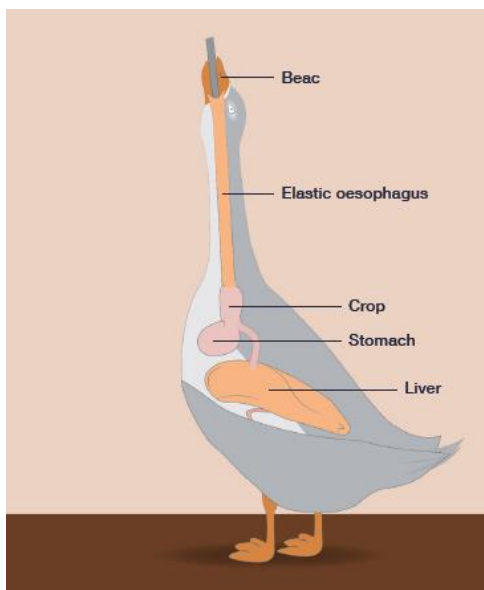


Foie gras production is based on the observation of a natural phenomenon

Migratory birds naturally stock fat in their liver before their journey. The fattening of geese and ducks for foie gras production is a mere reproduction of this **natural, non-pathological**, and **totally reversible physiological aptitude**. This has also been proven by scientific studies, notably by INRA². This aptitude is still present in the most suitable species for assisted feeding (Mulard and Muscovy ducks) although they do not migrate.

The fattening is adapted to the anatomy of ducks and geese

The anatomical characteristics of these animals - no glottis and an elastic oesophagus that can expand like a snake - allow them to swallow all kinds of prey such as fish or frogs. Consequently, as confirmed by scientific studies³, the fattening of ducks and geese **does not cause suffering** to these animals.



The assisted feeding is carried out by the expert gesture of specially trained professionals and lasts only a few seconds, twice a day during the fattening phase. If the breeder stops fattening the animals, their liver will return to their initial weight in a short time, as hepatic steatosis is a non-pathological and totally reversible process.

² Elisabeth Baeza study, INRA Prod. Anim, 2013, 26 (5), 403-414.

³ Scientific studies have been synthesised by the French scientists Gérard Guy (INRA) and Xavier Fernandez (ENSAT) in a document written in October 2013.

Euro Foie Gras stresses that foie gras is a healthy and high-quality product, that the anatomy of fat palmipeds cannot and should not be compared to human anatomy and calls to stop anthropomorphism.

There is no alternative to assisted feeding for foie gras production

Although fattening by using assisted feeding respects the animals' digestive rhythm, the Standing Committee of the Council of Europe asked, in its above-mentioned recommendation of 1999, that research for alternative methods be conducted. The research carried out in France has so far not been successful⁴.

New scientific studies are underway, including studies of bacteria in the gut microbiota that may cause natural liver fattening in geese. However, none of these studies are conclusive.

Furthermore, Euro Foie Gras stresses that, contrary to the claims made for certain products, there is no foie gras produced without assisted feeding on the market. Operators who market products claiming to be able to replace foie gras, by promoting a process without assisted feeding, have not provided any proof of the veracity of their claims⁵.

Euro Foie Gras underlines that if, in the future, an alternative production method is found, it is important that it respects the welfare of the animals, that it guarantees the same characteristics and quality of the product and that it is economically viable for the farmers.

A proactive sector



Proactively, the five European countries producing foie gras adopted in 2011 the **European Charter on breeding of waterfowl for foie gras**⁶. This Charter sets out the commitments of the sector based on the 12 principles of the European Commission's "Welfare Quality Project".

At 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**⁷ **controlled by the public authorities**, enacts specific obligations relating to the housing system of fat palmipeds in terms of density and space. **In**

⁴ For example, experiments on alternatives that are detrimental to animal welfare and health, such as the destruction of the satiety centre, have been abandoned. The experiment conducted by researchers Gérard Guy (INRA) and Xavier Fernandez (ENSAT) in 2006 on the effects of a "feed rationing-release" sequence on Mulard ducks resulted in only a transitory overconsumption and moderate actual liver fattening.

⁵ Euro Foie Gras has developed a note that describes the so-called "alternatives" to foie gras and explains that there is no foie gras produced without assisted feeding on the market.

⁶ European Charter on breeding of waterfowl for foie gras:
https://www.eurofoiegras.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EN-EUROFOIEGRAS_CHARTE-1.pdf

⁷ Royal decree of 1994 on the protection and welfare of the animals modified in 2010:
<http://environnement.wallonie.be/legis/bienetreanimal/bienetre045.html>

France, the voluntary approach “Palm I Trust”⁸ launched and led by the sector, aims to guarantee and certify the good practices of the breeders with regard notably to animal welfare (commitments cover, for example, food, comfort, health and animal hygiene). 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. A similar approach is being implemented **in Spain** with the **Code of Good Practice on Animal Welfare for the Production of Foie Gras**⁹. **In Hungary**, the Hungarian Poultry Council adopted in 2011 a **Code of Good Practice for the waterfowl sector**¹⁰.

At European level, Euro Foie Gras is finalising an ambitious internal work to develop and adopt common animal welfare indicators that ensure proper and harmonised implementation of EU legislation, and even go beyond EU legal requirements in some cases.

If you want to visit a foie gras farm and have an experience on the ground, do not hesitate to contact us:

<https://www.eurofoiegras.com/en/who-we-are/>

In the meantime, **the video available on this link** will make you discover the production of foie gras in a farm in

France: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b62QedS2BsE>

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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⁸ The “Palm I Trust” approach, which is in its implementing phase, brings together 15 organisations representing almost 90% of the sector.

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

⁹ Code of Good Practice on Animal Welfare for the Production of Foie Gras:

http://www.elfoiegras.es/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/C%C3%B3digo-Buenas-Pr%C3%A1cticas-para-el-BA-Palm%C3%ADpedas-Grasas_2020.pdf

¹⁰ Code of good practice for the waterfowl sector:

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