

# Hatchery delivers quacking crop

## Goslings, ducklings farm's specialties

By Ana Orozco

The Californian

John Metzger has created what many in the hatchery industry would consider a valuable business commodity. It's a new and improved model of duck — the Golden 300 Hybrid.

Metzger is the owner and operator of Metzger Farms, a duckling and gosling producer in Chualar since 1978. The Golden 300 Hybrid, a duck that was genetically produced using Khaki Campbell duck genes, can lay up to 290 eggs a year.

Metzger Farms is the only hatchery of its kind in Monterey County. Their specialty is Danish ducks. Metzger ships out 375,000 baby ducks every year for use as meat production to commercial growers all over the country.

He also ships eggs throughout the country. His biggest markets are areas with large concentrations of Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino populations. Much of his business is in the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas.

One of the company's major products is something Filipinos call "balut" or Vietnamese call "hot vit lon." This delicacy is a duck egg that has been incubated for 17 days instead of the usual 28, removed for boiling and consumed. This boiled duck embryo in a shell is considered highly nutritious.

"I have one customer in Saipan in the South Pacific who I express mail 600 to 800 eggs to every week," Metzger said.

The specialty poultry industry in Monterey County, which includes duck eggs, ducklings and goslings, brought in \$980,000 last year, according to the annual crop report. The rest of the poultry industry in the county brought in \$3.7 million last year and produced 936,400 heads of poultry.

Central Coast Fryer Farms of San Jose was probably responsible for at least 99 percent of that \$3.7 million, according to Gary Wiley, a deputy with the county agriculture commissioner's office. The company raises poultry in north county.

"There aren't poultry facilities in this valley," Metzger said. "There are many in Santa Clara county. There have been (poultry facilities here) in the past."

Metzger's father, Olin, an English teacher, originally started the duck



Above, John Metzger, owner and operator of Metzger Farms in Chualar, produces ducklings, goslings and eggs for various consumer uses. At right, some of the company's ducks spend time at the hatchery, which is the only one of its kind in Monterey County. The company ships out 375,000 baby ducks every year to sites all over the country.

Photos by Clay Peterson

business 20 years ago, which at that time sold American ducks and egg. His reason for starting the business was quite simply that he just liked ducks. Metzger took over the business when he returned home after graduating from California State Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo.

"I enjoy it because it's something different, but it allows new products and new ideas," Metzger said. "It's not a bulk commodity type of sale

because (ducks and goslings are) fairly unique."

Unlike most of the commodities shipped out of the Salinas Valley via train or truck, the ducklings and goslings are delivered by the U.S. Post Office. They're shipped in specially designed cardboard boxes that allow ventilation. Federal Express and United Parcel Service

doesn't allow poultry delivery. Most customers receive their shipment within one or two days after the day-old hatchlings leave Chualar.

"They're hatched Sunday night, shipped Monday and they'll usually get them by Tuesday or early Wednesday morning," Metzger said.

The hatchlings can do without food. See **DUCKS/Page 2B**



# DUCKS: Crop that quacks

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or water during the time it takes them to reach their destination because they have a food reserve. The egg yolk is not used up during the ducklings' development. Instead, it will all be used just before the duckling hatches, which provides a reservoir of energy.

Metzer began breeding the Danish ducks 10 years ago. He was looking for some breeding stock when he came across the Pekin duck.

"This was really the only stuff available worldwide," he said. "He was the only breeder selling breeding stock because most of the other duck producers are vertically integrated and have their own breeding stock, hatcheries and process their own ducks."

Most breeders are in the business to sell processed duck, not breeding stock, Metzer said. Many feel they have the best ducks and don't want to sell them to a competitor. With miles and miles between Metzer and the Danish breeder, competition is eliminated. Metzer imports new breeding stock four times a year.

Another plus to buying Danish breeding stock was that it was the most productive one he was able to get.

"Of what I could purchase, the ones from Denmark lay more eggs and the ducks became larger and there's less fat," Metzer said.

The amount of fat on the ducks and quantity of eggs they lay depends on the duck variety. The largest strains will lay 170 eggs in 280 days or 40 weeks, while the smallest ones will lay 230 eggs.

The Golden Hybrid 300 not only produces more eggs than any of the Danish varieties, it's also easier to determine the sex of the hatchlings.

"It's unique in that when it hatches the females are shades of brown and the males are shades of black," Metzer said.

Every year, there are 5,000 adult ducks of 13 different breeds on the 22-acre farm. The ratio is 4,200 females to 800 males. There are five and a half females for every male. There are 14 different breeds of geese. Although the farm specializes in Danish ducks, buyers have a wide range of other breeds to choose from.

Besides the Golden 300 Hybrid, the next and newest venture for Metzer Farms will be to grow geese for the

Christmas market and also for the Chinese market in San Francisco. The company has recently rented a facility in Fresno to produce goose eggs year-round and grow geese that are smaller than the Christmas geese to be shipped to San Francisco.

"Oftentimes in Chinatown you'll see barbecued ducks hanging in the window," Metzer said. "That's our market."

There are already birds on the five-acre Fresno facility, and they will begin to lay eggs by the middle of December. From that point on the eggs will be produced all year. The first birds will be available for market sometime in March. Metzer hopes to expand his geese market to Vancouver, Los Angeles, New York and Chicago.

Using eastern European goose technology they are able to produce goose eggs year-round. They've always grown geese seasonally, but now they're using eastern European goose.

"With these facilities we're putting in, we'll be able to cycle flocks in through production throughout the year," Metzer said. "One flock will come in and another will come in before that one goes out."

The farm now grows between 1,000 to 2,000 geese for the Christmas market, but at the new facility, Metzer hopes to grow 1,200 geese a week to sell. These geese will be processed for the Chinese market at about eight to nine weeks as opposed to the typical Christmas goose, which takes 16 to 20 weeks.

All orders for eggs or hatchlings from Metzer Farms are strictly mail-order. They advertise in Mother Earth News or places like that where people can phone and places orders of no less than 10 birds. Metzer Farms also has a Web site with price lists, tips for growing ducks and geese as well as descriptions and photos of the different breeds.

The cost for a day-old Danish duck will depend on the value of the parent breeder, and that is usually \$6.

Usually, once the ducks or geese have laid the eggs in the 40-week period, they are rested or sold and new breeding stock is brought in that will be more productive than a molted bird. This assures that Metzer is continually upgrading and improving so he's always got the most up-to-date stock.