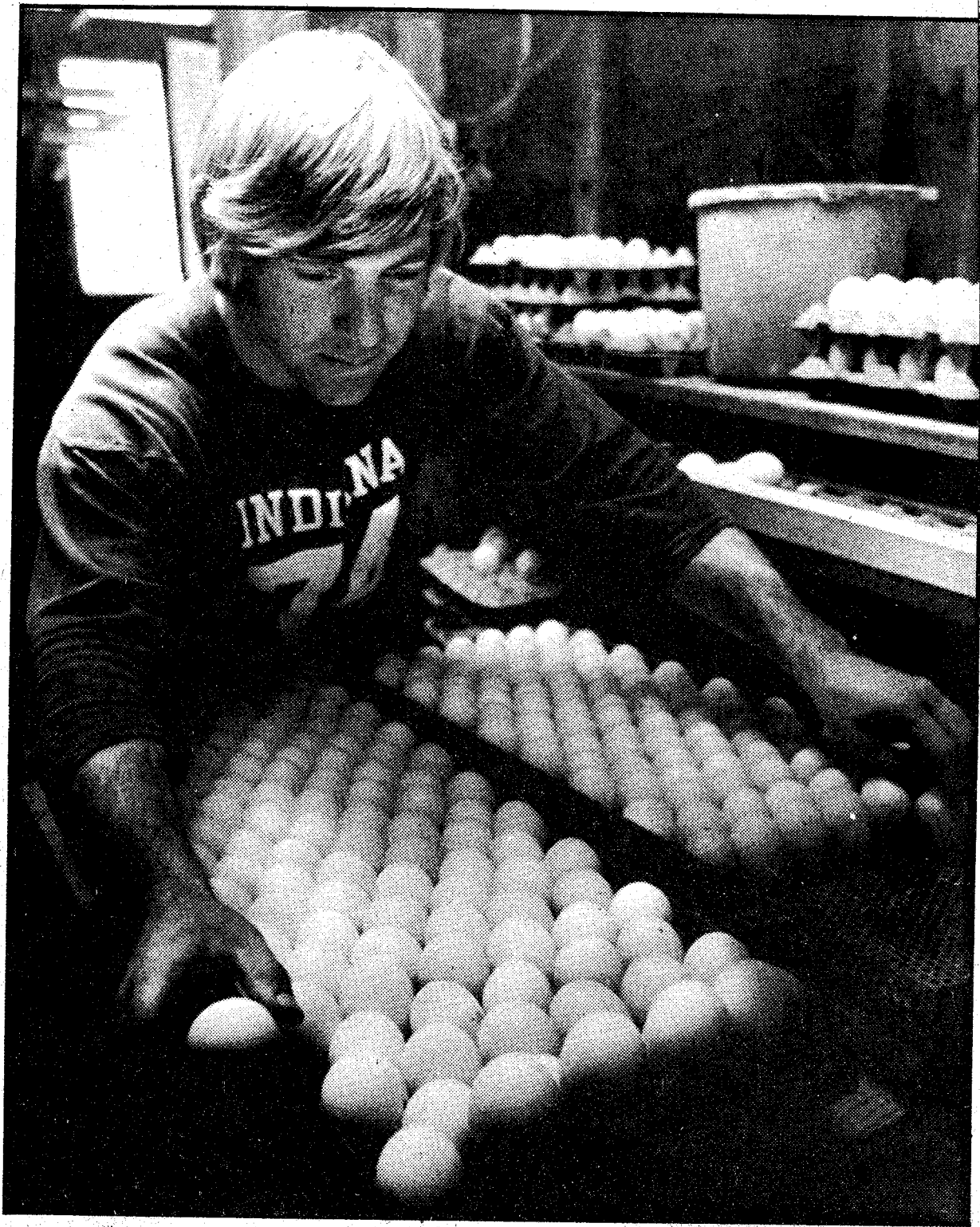
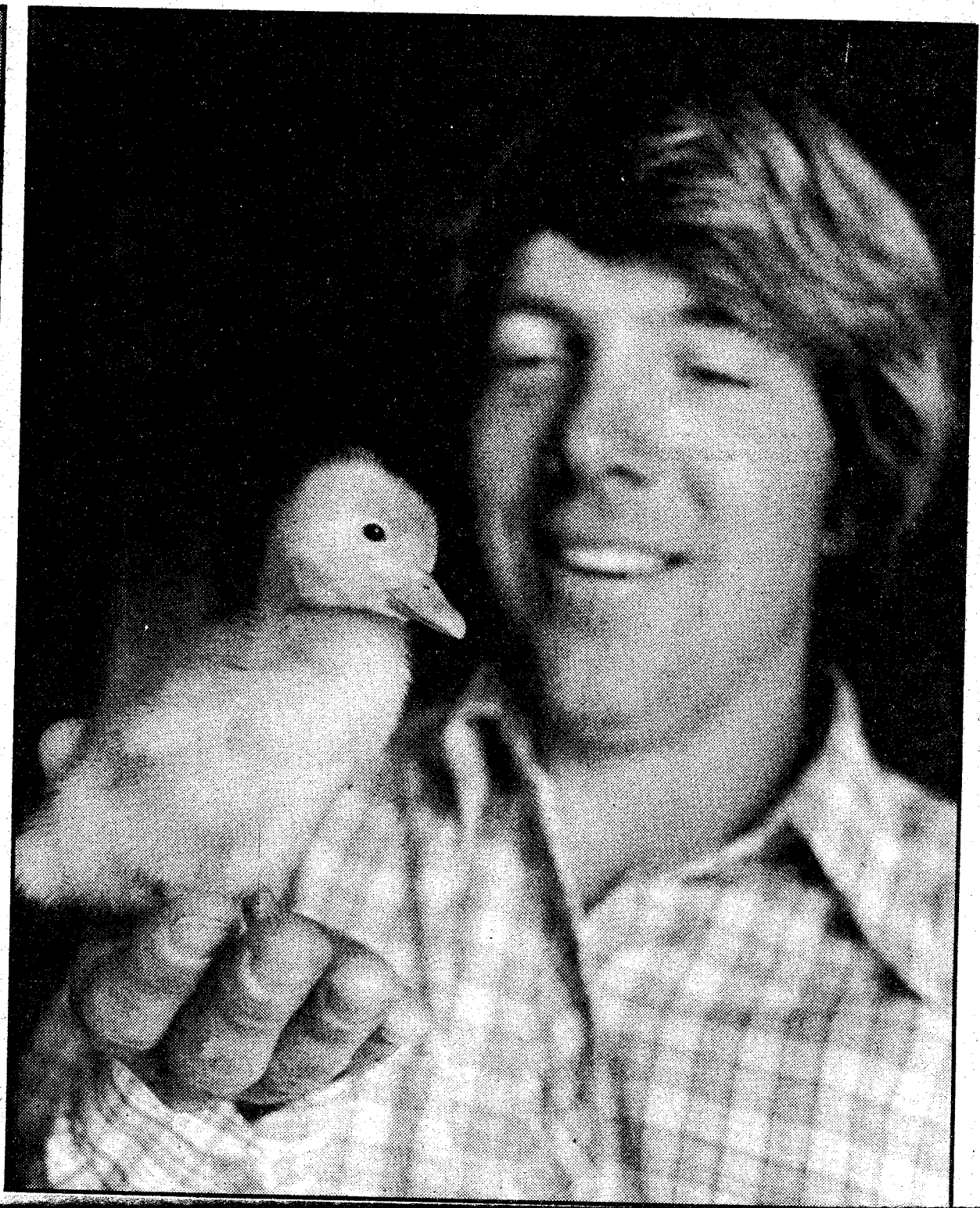


**WEEKENDER**

# **Living**

Section Three SALINAS, CALIFORNIA, SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 1980 Page 27





# John Metzger's ranch has gone to the ducks

By TOM LEYDE  
Weekender Living Editor

CHUALAR — If John Metzger were to write a book about his new career, it might be entitled "The Ducks and I," or "All Duck Eggs Great and Small."

Metzger operates a 12-acre duck ranch off Old Stage Road, just outside of Chualar. He has several thousand of the web-footed creatures, which are raised primarily for their eggs and for sales of ducklings to feed stores.

But it's the egg business that brings excitement to the 24-year-old rancher's blue eyes.

The market for balut duck eggs has tremendous potential in this country and Metzger is hoping to tap that market in a big way.

Balut is a Filipino word for a fertile duck egg that has been incubated for anywhere from 12 to 17 days. They are considered a delicacy among the Filipino, Vietnamese and other Indo-Chinese cultures.

Some people ask him what the English word for balut is, said Metzger, "but there's no English word for it because it's not a food item for us."

Balut duck eggs, Metzger explained, are boiled and eaten like one would eat a soft-boiled chicken egg, cracking a hole in one end and spooning out the contents.

"I've never eaten one ... " Metzger said. "I've been told by several people that they learn to eat them by having a couple of beers and then eating them in the dark."

"They (Filipinos) like it (the balut) because inside there's more duck," laughs Dominick Digon, a customer at Philippine Imports on Alisal Street, which carries eggs from the Metzger ranch.

"They're very delicious. They're a good source of calcium," said Connie Sonico. Sonico, chairman of the cultural program for the Filipino Community of Salinas, said the balut is considered more of a delicacy in central Luzon in the Philippines, particularly in the Tagalog provinces.

Because baluts are high in calcium and iron, Sonico explained, they are eaten in parts of The

Philippines where milk and red meat are scarce. In the Filipino community, Sonico said, baluts are a snack type food. "We eat it (the balut) if we have a game, like a card game ... any time of day ... " or "part of a dinner."

On the streets of Manila, she said, it's not unusual to see vendors selling hot baluts. "People buy them buy the dozen," she said.

They also buy them by the dozen in the Monterey County area.

"I'm not even satisfying the needs of the Monterey Bay area," said Metzger. "I could sell 30,000 baluts a week," he claims.

duating and in June 1978 tripled the number of ducks at the Metzger ranch.

"It's a very primitive industry," he said of duck egg production in this country. "It's growing, but there are so very few producers ... The way I've had to do it is a lot of trial and error ... and use methods used by other poultry industries ..."

Last fall, Metzger visited 15 duck ranches on the East Coast, Midwest and in Canada to observe methods he could incorporate into his operation. Not all of them were that willing to share their knowledge.

In Europe, Metzger said, duck

They sell for 50 cents apiece at Philippine Imports, or \$5.50 a dozen.

Eggs are gathered daily at the Metzger ranch and washed and sorted by size: jumbo, medium, small and pee wee. They're then checked for fertility on a fluorescent light table. Those that are fertile are placed in an incubator. At 17 days, the embryo inside the egg has not yet developed feathers. After 17 days, the baluts are packaged for egg distributors.

Besides the balut eggs, the ranch produces a salt egg, also popular among Filipino and other oriental cultures.

The eggs are placed in barrels of salt water (600 to a barrel) for four weeks and sold. These eggs are boiled, dyed red and chopped up for use on salads, Metzger said.

From a financial standpoint, said Metzger, "it's more profitable for me to hatch the ducklings." A duckling will sell for 80 cents, while a balut sells for 30 cents. But he feels there is a greater profit potential in balut production.

Hatching ducklings, though, is part of the duck ranch operation. Metzger shipped out more than 6,000 in the last few weeks and last year sold 23,000.

But on the whole, Metzger estimated, for every 100 eggs laid over a year's time, between five and 10 percent are hatched and the remainder are sold as baluts.

He said there are four or five other balut producers in California, but believes his operation is the largest. He's even considering raising oriental vegetables and herbs because some cultures won't eat baluts without certain herbs and vegetables.

Metzger finds his career a challenge and a real learning process, but doesn't expect to get rich from it. It's a seven day a week job, even with his parents and three employees working for him.

"It's not a glamor job ... It's not like being a lawyer ...," he said. "If I wanted to make a lot of money, I wouldn't be doing this." But, he said, "there's a lot of pluses in working for yourself."

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And as more Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian and other oriental people emigrate to the U.S., the market is expected to expand.

At present, Metzger is working on profitable ways of expanding production at his duck ranch through cross breeding and automation. It's been a slow process because there's been very little research in duck egg production in the U.S.

Metzger, a member of the Hartnell College Board of Trustees, decided to give duck ranching a try before graduating from the University of California at Davis in 1978.

"About a year before graduating, I started giving serious thought about it as a full-time business," said Metzger, who has a degree in animal science.

"My father (Olin Metzger) always had ducks for insect control," Metzger said. And that led to supplying ducklings to area feed stores. "It sort of grew into a full-time hobby," he said.

Metzger concentrated on business courses at Davis before gra-

egg and duck meat production is more highly developed than in this country. He had hoped to import fertile duck eggs from France, Holland and England as a means of improving egg production. But U.S. import restrictions stopped those plans.

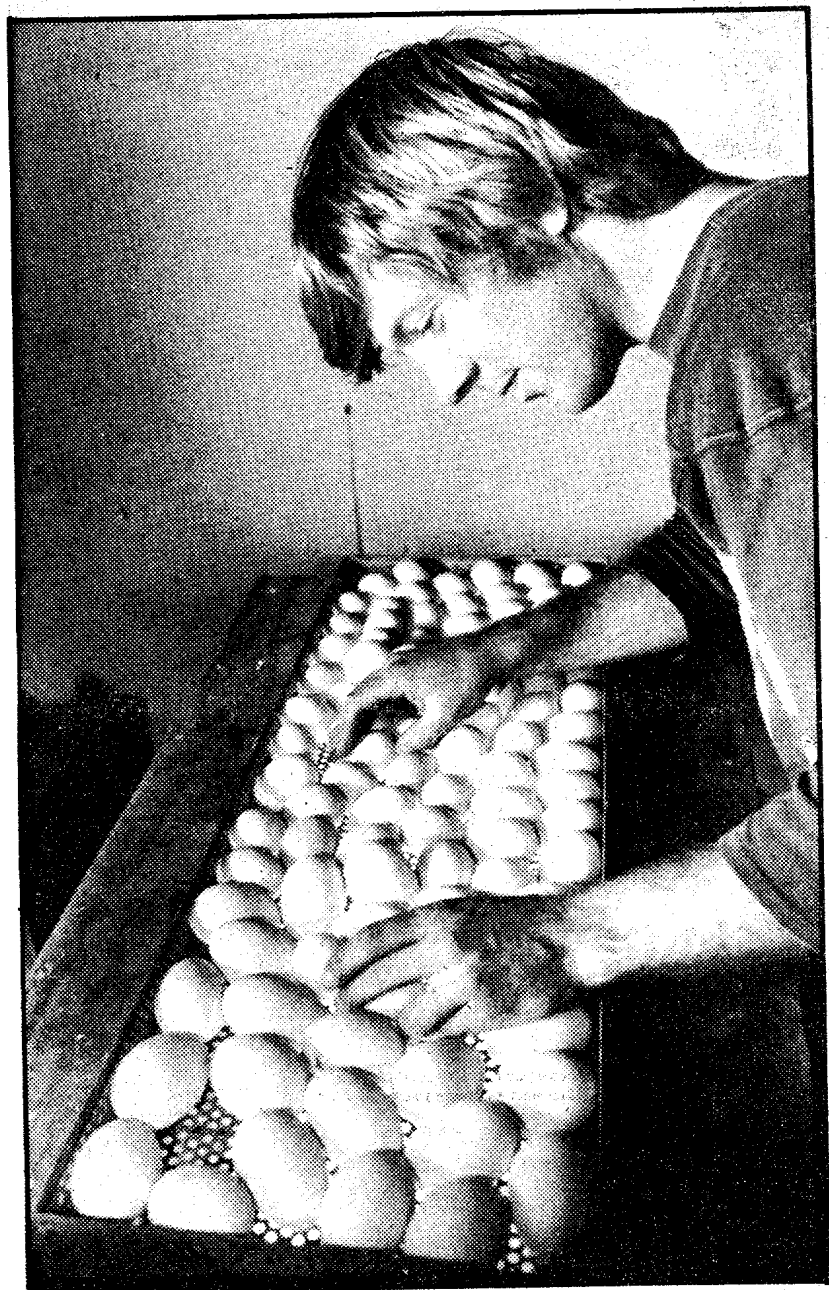
Ironically, there are fewer governmental restrictions on duck egg production in the U.S. than there are for other varieties of poultry.

Two breeds of ducks make up the majority of Metzger's egg producers: the white Pekin and the brown khaki Campbell. The brown khaki Campbell lays more eggs than the white Pekin, however the white Pekin lays a larger egg.

Both breeds, Metzger explained, have been bred for meat production. "It's almost as if I'm trying to run a dairy with meat production animals," he said.

Duck eggs are more expensive than chicken eggs because it takes more feed to produce a duck egg, he said. Balut eggs are also more expensive. Metzger sells them for 30 cents apiece.

Californian photos  
by Clay Peterson



*Duck rancher John Metzer (top left) sorts duck eggs by size at the ranch, outside of Chualar. A fuzzy, yellow duckling (top right) sits in Metzer's hand. Besides producing eggs, the ranch supplies ducklings and a few goslings to feed stores. Above, Metzer checks eggs for fertility before placing them in an incubator.*

WEEKENDER

**Living**

