

Strategy

KFC signs up to the Better Chicken Commitment in a number of European countries

Health

Minimising heat stress in the poultry industry

Health

Nations across the globe are making commitments against antimicrobial resistance

POULTRY WORLD

Volume 35 - No. 7 - 2019



DUCK EGGS

booming in the US



PHOTOS: CHRIS MCCULLOUGH

The Metzgers keep around 15,000 ducks, of multiple breeds, on their farms.

US duck farm competes for labour

It's an exciting era for the Metzger family from California who produce day old duck chicks and eggs that are shipped all over the US and Canada. Demand for duck eggs from the food and retail sectors is booming.

BY CHRIS MCCULLOUGH

The Metzgers are having to increase their annual production of one million eggs to keep customers happy. While the egg business is quite lucrative selling for up to US\$ 1 per egg, there are also challenges and competing for labour with cannabis farms is one of the major difficulties.

There are two farms in the business and the first is Metzger Farms in Gonzales, California, which is the home ranch where the hatchery is located. The second unit, Olinday Farms, is located in Hollister, California. This particular farm site was a decommissioned turkey breeder ranch that the Metzgers purchased and rehabilitated after it lay empty for ten years. It started full production just last year and is already performing well.

To introduce the family, John Metzger is the owner and president of Metzger Farms and his son Marc is the president of Olinday Farms and general manager of Metzger Farms. As Marc explains, the farms are performing well as a new found interest in duck eggs broadens out across North America. Marc said: "Olinday Farms in Hollister extends to 12 hectares and there are five poultry buildings on the site which is surrounded by fields that a local farmer uses to grow and harvest hay on. Our farm in Gonzales is slightly smaller and is surrounded by leafy green vegetable fields. "We have 20 different breeds of ducks totalling 15,000 breeder and laying ducks and 4,500 breeder geese. Our main egg production duck strains are the Golden 300 and the White Layer. My father established these strains for high egg production about 30 years ago. Our other breeders are used for meat production or for hobbyists," he said.

Fresh duck eggs

Olinday Farms sells around 20,000 fresh duck eggs per week into the retail, foodservice, and food manufacturing markets. All of the ducklings and goslings produced by Metzger Farms are sold as one day olds immediately after hatching. These are shipped via the mail or by air freight throughout the United States and Canada. When it comes to feeding the birds, Marc and his father have developed a close working relationship

FARM REPORT ▶▶▶

with a local feed mill. Marc said: "We feed our birds a corn based diet developed with a local family owned feed mill." He continues: "I am concerned about rising feed costs, though obtaining labour is much higher on my radar. We are competing for labour against an emerging cannabis market in California. In addition, the Silicon Valley is an easy commute from our farm so we are also battling sky-rocketing living costs." "Our fresh duck eggs are sold to natural type food stores and tablecloth restaurants. We also sell eggs to companies which convert them to salted duck eggs for the California Chinese market. We sell over 1.5 million day old birds a year," he said.

Bird flu awareness

As with every poultry farmer around the world, protecting their flock from Avian Influenza is high up the priority list and more so for the Metzgers who have already had a bird flu scare. "The majority of our birds are in barns which have chicken wire all around to keep wild birds out," said Marc, "but allow wind to pass through the building to help keep the litter dry." "When raising young breeders, we used to allow them access to an adjacent pasture but have stopped since the threat of AI. We also use the Danish entry system for all our barns to reduce risk of cross contamination going into the barn or leaving the barn."

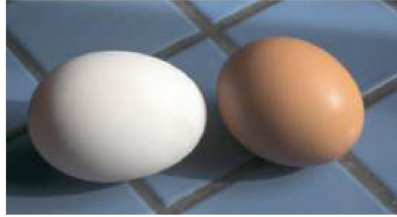
"In the past we found low pathogenic AI in one flock that we were allowing outdoors. This was found in our quarterly testing but the ducks showed zero sign of sickness and no increased mortality. This was an extremely scary situation for everybody working on the farm as we did not know the consequences, or if we would have to depopulate the farm." Working with the California Department of Food and Agriculture along with the USDA, the Metzgers were able to keep all their breeders and continue shipping our day old birds and eggs.

Challenges

"Our main predators are foxes, coyotes and bobcats but we try our best to keep them out with plastic coated chicken wire and fencing," Marc says. As with any business there are a number of challenges as well as opportunities and the same goes for Metzger duck farms. "Farming and hatching ducklings and goslings can be challenging at times because it's a relatively small industry in the United States compared to chickens and turkeys." He continues; "We are constantly modifying equipment to fit our needs. In addition, because we have 20 different breeds of ducks and 16 breeds of geese, it is difficult to standardise or automate processes.

"Our main advantage is our knowledge and experience. We have been doing this for 50 years. And people come to us for information and trust us. With our sales history of duck egg layers, we know the fresh egg market is growing faster than ever in the United States. Chefs are calling us to order eggs, and farmers are putting in orders for 25, 100 or 1,000 females. We've never had so much excitement about duck eggs," he

said. According to Marc's estimates, there are around ten million duck eggs produced in the US each year for resale. "This is not including backyard home grown produced duck eggs," he said. "This is still far below the per capita consumption of England, but I believe sales will grow as more chefs and consumers learn about duck egg greatness." "Here at Olin-day Farms, we are producing 20,000 eggs weekly with increased production on its way. Eggs are selling for about \$1 per egg at retail and \$0.80 for foodservice," said Marc.



Ducks eggs sell for up to US\$ 1 at retail and \$0.80 for foodservice each.



The day old birds are purchased by other farmers and hobbyists.



Marc Metzger examines fresh eggs set for delivery to chefs of white tablecloth restaurants.