

*Feed stores, Oriental communities main markets*

# Duck ranching a marketing, production challenge

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Though the competition is tough and the production information is lacking, commercial duck production can offer profits for a farmer who is both an innovative manager and an alert marketer, a Gonzales duck producer said.

John Metzger of Metzger Farms said his duck production began as a hobby with his father and has resulted in a farm with about 5,000 ducks in production.

The Metzger farm produces two major products—ducklings for feed stores throughout the western states and incubated fertile eggs for Oriental markets. Metzger sells two products to predominantly Oriental consumers: freshly incubated fertile eggs—known as “balut sa puti” to Filipinos and as “hot vit lon” to Vietnamese—and salted fertile eggs.

Metzger noted that he is not currently marketing ducks for the meat markets because the competition is stiff. Producing eggs using meat producing technology is analogous to starting a dairy with Hereford instead of Holstein cattle.

Metzger has added many new management practices to better his egg production. For example, he has replaced a pond watering system with a nipple valve system. Underneath the watering system, he has dug a drainage pit which is covered by a wire screen so that the ducks cannot get into the pit. Metzger said this pit system reduces the mess, keeps the ducks cleaner, and in turn keeps the eggs cleaner for

those who gather them in the barns.

Another practice along these lines is replacing the straw bedding in the nesting barns with redwood shavings. Metzger said the shavings are more absorbent and easier to clean than the straw.

Metzger said April and May are the busiest months for duckling production, with intense activity between Palm Sunday and Easter. During these months he said he ships between 2,000 and 3,000 ducks and between 1,000 and 1,500 geese.

During these months he also has to consider keeping the incubated egg production up. “What we try to do is have more ducks in production then so that we don’t cut the egg production,” Metzger said.

Metzger said the eggs are collected everyday, machine washed, then graded. The eggs are kept separate according to the pen they came from, and are all put into the incubator on Mondays.

After 17 days of incubation Metzger says he decides whether to sell the eggs as balut or incubate them for another 11 days and sell the hatched out ducklings.

The temperature of the incubator is kept at 99 degrees with a relative humidity of 86 percent. When the ducklings have hatched out, they are marked by clipping their claws to denote their breed and weight size. At this time, one wing of each is also clipped to prevent them from flying.

The ducklings are then packed in cardboard boxes, and the box is labeled for shipping. Metzger said the ducklings are able to sustain themselves for about three days on the yolk materials they have absorbed through their skin prior to hatching out.

Another use he has just started experimenting with is to store the incubated eggs another five weeks in a salt brine and sell the salted eggs to the Filipino and Chinese markets. He said the salted eggs are boiled for use on salads.

Marketing is an important part of his operation, according to Metzger. “I enjoy trying different marketing and merchandising methods,” he said.

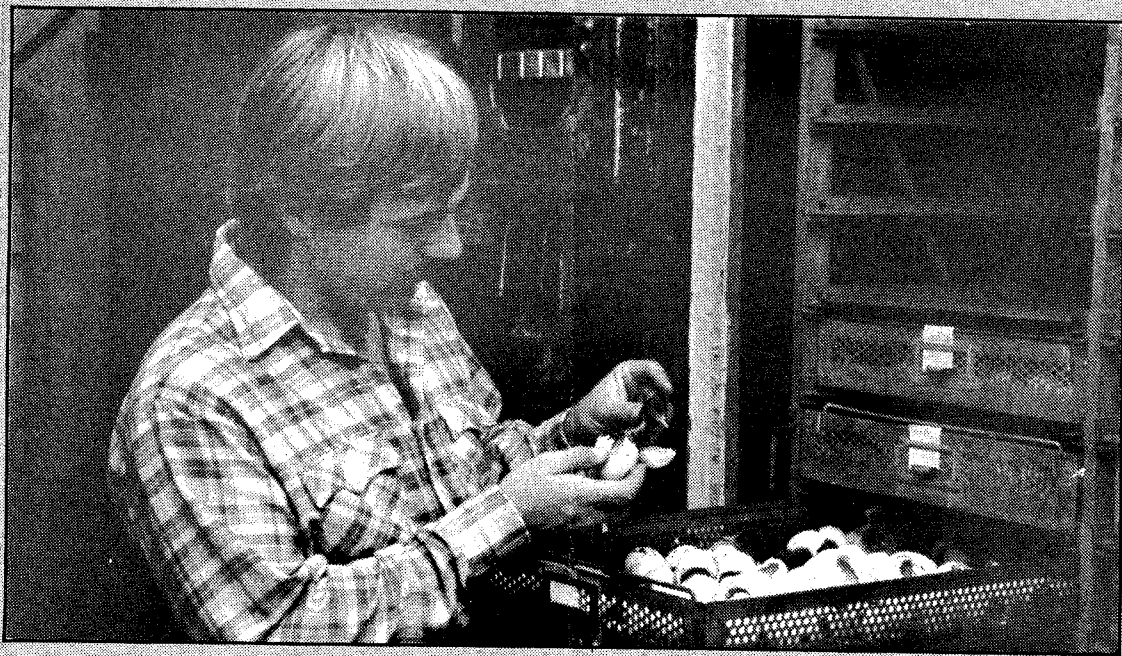
Metzger has tried many experimental marketing practices, such as sending a full color poster of different duck varieties to the feed stores that buy his ducks. The poster provides information on ducks in general but also introduces the customers to Metzger’s name.

In the past, Metzger has phoned all of the feed stores in California to introduce himself and his duck farm. This year he said he will call all the feed stores in the western states to do the same.

He said he also plans to install a toll-free phone number so it will be easier for feed store owners to contact him.

Metzger has also put into practice innovative marketing ideas in his incubated fertile egg merchandising. For example, there are little or no state regulations on the marketing of duck eggs.





All the government requires in the labeling of the eggs is that the label says, "Duck embryos, incubated fertile eggs," according to Metzger. But in addition to that, Metzger's labels also show when the eggs were removed from the incubator, who candled the eggs and how old the eggs were when removed from the incubator.

compete with them on price, the Chinese method of preparing salted eggs is unacceptable to the Filipinos. Metzger said that if he could reduce his production costs, he could greatly expand his production for the salted egg market.

He also noted that the market for ducklings,

*NOT-SO-UGLY DUCKLING—John Metzger greets one of his wards, a newly hatched duckling, one of the three end products he sells from his Gonzales ranch. The live hatched ducklings go to retail stores; fertilized incubated eggs to Oriental markets; and salted eggs to Filipino customers.*

most of which end up as backyard pets, could be expanded through promotion to those who are not buying ducks now.

"But again," he said. "I don't see the market quadrupling every year."

Apart from selling to feed stores under his own label, he said he also sells to other hatcheries or ships ducklings directly to outlets for other hatcheries under their labels.

Metzger said he has other potential duck egg products in mind for trying out in the near future, but declined to say specifically what they were.

Metzer said he also stamps the eggs with a mark which identifies them as coming from the Metzer farm. He said the stamp color is changed every week so the customers will have some idea how old the eggs are. He noted that if customers see the same color of stamp on the eggs for several weeks, they will know the eggs are not fresh.

Metzer said this also cuts down on the number of eggs returned. He can now often tell whether eggs have gone bad because he has blundered or whether they have gone bad because they were just kept in the store too long without being sold.

He said the nature of the two markets he sells to are completely different in their demands. According to Metzer, the duckling market at the feed stores is based on service and product quality. Feed store owners can become loyal buyers over time, he said.

In contrast, he noted the Oriental incubated egg market is based on price. "You may have served a market for five years, delivered a quality product, and if someone comes along with a product of less quality, but it's a penny cheaper, they'll stop buying from you," he said.

As far as the future of his markets, Metzer said the balut market has a definite ceiling. Other farmers are beginning to produce the incubated fertile eggs, and the number of consumers is finite.

Metzer said the market will slow and decline over the next 20 to 30 years. "A lot of younger Filipinos and Vietnamese are not acquiring a taste for the balut or hot vit lon," he said.

However, Metzer said the demand for salted eggs would not face a similar decline because it is not as difficult for the young Chinese and Filipinos to develop a taste for the salted egg as it is to develop a taste for balut.

In fact, Metzer noted the salted egg market has the potential for expansion. Even though imports from China are so low priced he cannot

## Raise ducks? You're on your own

Although ducks and geese are common barnyard animals, Gonzales duck rancher John Metzer says helpful research information for commercial operators like himself is as scarce as — well, duck's teeth.

"When it comes to research the turkey and chicken industries are light years ahead of us," Metzer said. "Since so little is known I try to follow what's going on in the chicken or turkey industry and try to apply it to duck production," he said.

Metzer noted that since so few people are involved in raising ducks commercially, competition dictates that one producer does not share his production information with another, which further depends the information gap.

Even when information is shared, it is often difficult to get an agreement on what is correct, according to Metzer. "You talk to one person, and he'll say one thing. Then you'll talk to someone else, and they'll say, 'Naw that won't work,' then tell you something else," Metzer said.

For example, Metzer said that it is commonly held that to get any bird into production, a farmer should give it more light to simulate spring lighting conditions. He noted chickens and turkeys have been able to go from 13 hours of natural light to 16 hours of natural and artificial light overnight.

He said according to the extension service the same should be true for ducks, but according to his travels to duck ranches at home and abroad this isn't necessarily so.

Metzer said that others say ducks are sensitive to too much light and will take 16 hours but not 17 hours of light. But he also noted that

one successful English duck producer exposes the ducks to 24 hours of light.

Because of this lack of information, Metzer said producers must strike out on their own. Metzer has built a special duck barn to be used for production experimentation. His research facility is capable of housing about 200 ducks with 14 ducks per pen.

Metzer said he plans to test different lighting schedules to find the best amount of light for his duck production. Other management practices he plans to simulate in his research barn are regulating the quantity of feed, regulating the protein content of the feed, developing feeding schedules, and developing watering schedules.

The lack of production information and an inability to communicate within the industry about ideas are not the only problems facing the duck industry. Others in agriculture do not understand what he is doing — he has problems in being viewed as a full time farmer, as a part of agriculture.

Also, he said, "With any specialty production, any success or failure, I have to put the blame on myself. I can't just blame a poor market. Whatever caused a problem I should have either seen it coming or known what to do about it."

There are some advantages. He said it allows him to be independent, do his own experimentation and claim successes as his own. There are always new opportunities and problems to conquer.

"I did it because it was different," Metzer said. "I wouldn't be in the turkey or chicken business because other people are doing it."