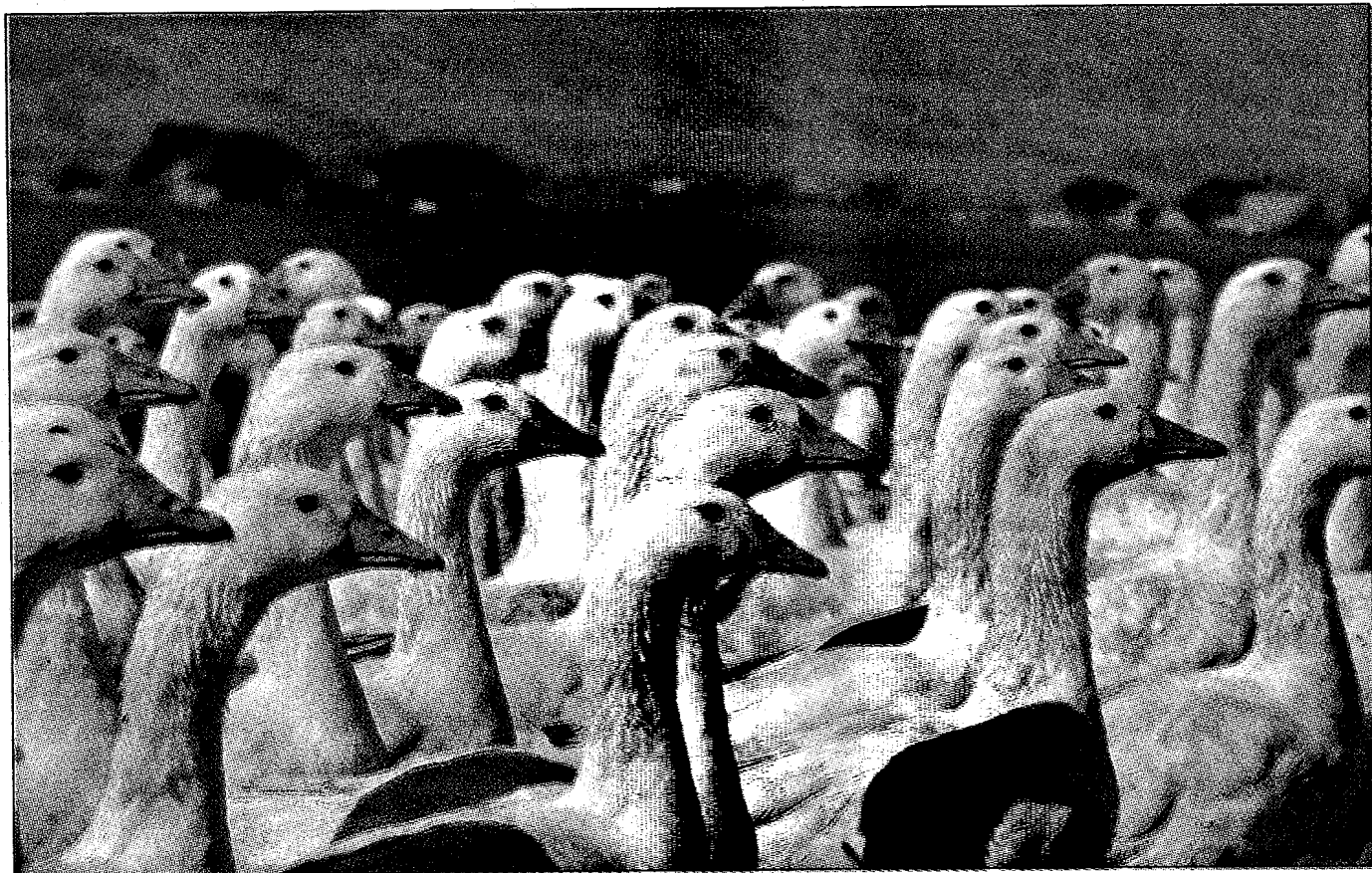


# BAY AREA

AND CALIFORNIA

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2001



Photos by DARRYL BUSH / The Chronicle

A flock of Embden geese took a walk in their enclosure at Metzger Farms in the Gabilan Mountain foothills above Gonzales.

# Hatching a plan

Monterey County farm thriving on live ducks, geese

By Eric Brazil

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

**L** GONZALES, Monterey County looking for large dewlap Toulouse or Sebastopol geese? Khaki Campbell or Blue Swedish ducks?

Look no further. John Metzger's your man.

Metzger Farms, in the Gabilan Mountain foothills above Gonzales, is America's water-



fowl supermarket.

The view from Metzger's front yard, looking west across the Salinas Valley, is like no other in America: 6,000 ducks and 3,000 geese — more than two dozen varieties — quacking, honking, gabbling.

As the nation mourns in the wake of Sept. 11 and frets over anthrax, the exotic niche business of duck and goose raising waddles along in tranquil, albeit noisy, counterpoint.

The demand for ducks and geese, as decorative pets, weeders, snail and insect eaters and "watchbirds," and for meat and eggs, grows steadily. So Metzger Farms' market woes are minimal. It is the only market.

"No other company in the country does what we do," said Metzger, 45.

Metzger started his bird business in 1978, via the back door, so to speak, selling balut eggs — partially incubated duck eggs with fully formed embryos — to the Bay Area Filipino and Vietnamese communities.

He is still shipping 8,000 to 9,000 balut eggs to Northern California weekly, but as his oper-

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15 to 20 commercial growers throughout the United States that are Metzger Farms' principal customers.

Metzger also sells by Web catalog to individuals — [www.metzgerfarms.com](http://www.metzgerfarms.com) — and at the ranch, 26000 Old Stage Rd. In addition to live birds, its products include fertilized eggs, blown eggs for decorative purposes and salted eggs.

Metzger figures that he's selling 400,000 ducklings and 50,000 goslings annually. Spring

► **BIRDS:** Page A24 Col. 1

ation has evolved, ducklings and goslings have become Metzger Farms' core business.

Every Monday morning, Metzger and his staff pop open the drawers of the farm's incubators to greet hundreds of just-hatched ducklings and goslings.

Before nightfall, the downy, chirping critters have been boxed in aerated, alfalfa-lined nests and shipped, by air and truck, to the 500 feed stores and

**Duck eggs at Metzger Farms include many in unusual colors, from green to yellow.**



**John Metzger, the farm's owner, held a 9-day-old mallard duckling above an open mailing box.**

# Farm taking pecking orders for live ducks, geese

## ► BIRDS

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is the heavy season for goslings because geese mate only then. Ducklings are a year-round proposition, with egg production stimulated by lighting the breeders' covered pens 17 hours a day.

Metzer, raised in Gonzales, is a graduate of the University of California at Davis, where he studied animal science and learned enough practical genetics to develop a hybrid duck — the Golden 300 — that lays more and larger eggs than the mallards and Khaki Campbells from which it was derived.

In developing his duck and goose business, he picked hardy species that are not nearly as susceptible to disease as chickens or turkeys. Predation is a minor problem, although red foxes and owls bag an occasional bird, Metzer said.

Metzer Farms does no killing. But it's raising 2,000 Embden geese — a meat breed of German origin — for sale to a Stockton firm that will slaughter and dress them for Christmas fare. It raises Peking ducks for sale to meat producers as well; they're seen hang-

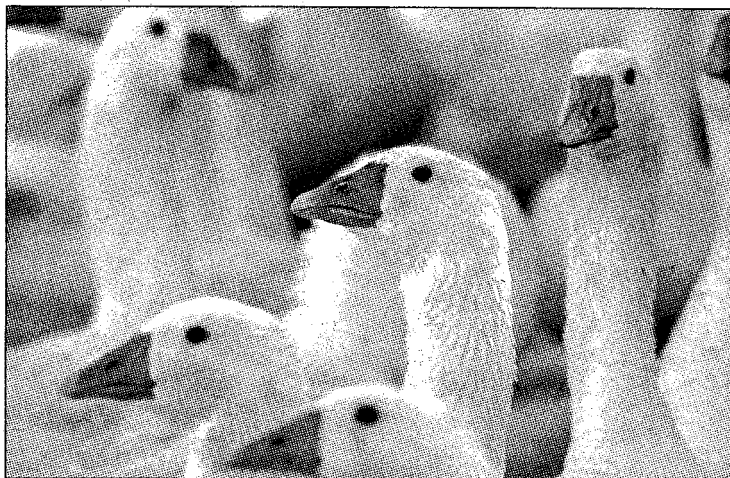
ing in the front windows of restaurants and groceries throughout San Francisco's Chinatown.

Metzer is also raising 400 white Chinese geese as breeders in an effort to develop a market in the San Francisco and Los Angeles Chinatowns.

"In China, the ratio of (dressed, processed) ducks to geese is about 63-35, but there are almost no geese here," he said. The geese, like the ducks hanging in Chinatown markets, are processed with head and feet on.

A cloud on the horizon for Metzer Farms and other live bird shippers is an effort by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to persuade the U.S. Postal Service to stop shipping live animals. One airline, Northwest, has already stopped carrying birds as mail, leaving only Continental, Delta and US Air as reliable carriers for breeders like Metzer.

Consequently, the recently created Bird Shippers of America is pressing legislation under which the Postal Service may require air carriers to accept mail shipments of day-old poultry. The measure, approved by the Senate as an amendment to an appropriations



DARRYL BUSH / The Chronicle

**Metzer Farms is raising 2,000 Embden geese for Christmas dinners.**

bill, is being considered by a conference committee.

Liesel Wolff, congressional liaison for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said airline employees have told her that the death rate for baby chicks "is huge — over 30 percent arrive dead, sometimes 100 percent," many of them crushed in transit.

Wolff said she had no knowledge of the arrival condition of ducklings.

Charges of excessive deaths are "absolute hogwash," said Murray

J. McMurray of Webster City, Iowa, chairman of the Bird Shippers of America.

The death rate for ducklings is "about 1 percent," Metzer said.

Politics aside, Metzer Farms is still in a growth mode. It recently acquired a flock of Guinea fowl, which are great eaters of insects and weed seeds. They also double as watchdogs, squawking at the approach of strangers.

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