

All of rancher's goose and duck eggs are golden

An egg is laid at Metzger Farms in Gonzales, and the wheel of fortune spins.

For the ducks and geese raised on John Metzger's 22-acre Gonzales farm, the first stop is at one of several 99.5-degree incubators. But not all will remain there through an incubation period that lasts 27.5 days for ducks and 30 days for geese.

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The wheel of fortune stops, for some, when a high-powered bulb reveals them to be unfertilized and lifeless. These shells, washed, drilled open and blown clean by compressed air, wind up in arts-and-crafts stores.

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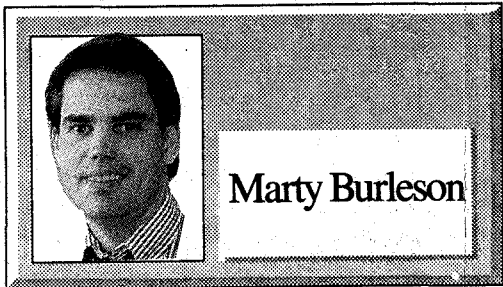
Day 17. It's the day of reckoning for several thousand duck eggs, when they and their partially formed embryos are sent on their way — to the dinner table.

Balut is a delicacy, savored primarily by Filipinos and Vietnamese people, consisting of duck embryos boiled and eaten from the shell. Metzger said he has few competitors in the balut industry, in part because the snack food is eaten almost exclusively at weddings and special occasions.

It takes an act of God — or Greyhound — to unseal these ducklings' fate.

"One batch got left at a Greyhound bus station for 10 days," Metzger said. "They started to hatch."

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It's hatching day, always a Sunday thanks to a bit of planning by Metzger and his 10 employees. From here, many ducklings and goslings go directly into the mail.

The carton is a ventilated box, 18-by-25-by-7 inches in size.

"They absorb the yolk just before they hatch, so they can go with no food or water for two or three days," Metzger said. "God designed it that way so we could mail them."

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Some of Metzger's fowl wind up as pets, wandering around backyards in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The Monday before Easter is Metzger's busiest day of the year.

"We hatched as much as we could," he said of the big day — April Fool's Day — earlier this month. "We hatched 16,000 ducks and 2,500

geese in 24 hours."

Metzger sells most of his animals through feed stores. He provides tips on "How to Raise Your Baby Ducks and Geese," including the following:

■ **UPON ARRIVAL:** Dip their beaks in water to ensure they get their first drink as soon as they arrive. If they sit with their eyes shut, they probably are dehydrated and may need assisted drinks throughout the day.

■ **WATER:** Waterfowl shouldn't have access to swimming water until they are fully feathered (at about two months of age).

■ **HEAT:** If they are huddled or climbing on one another, increase the temperature. If they avoid their heat source, reduce the temperature.

■ **HEALTH:** Protect them from dogs, cats and other predators.

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Most of Metzger's birds, however, find themselves in the same predicament as their long-gone kin, the balut. They may be bigger, but they're no better off.

"Fifty years ago, chicken was special," Metzger said. "But now it's not something you go to a restaurant for. For poultry, duck has filled that niche."

The sale of duck meat is on the rise, Metzger said, while the number of geese sold for consumption has remained steady. Among the coun-

try's most enthusiastic duck-eaters are the Hutterites, Metzger said, a Mennonite-like sect that lives in colonies around Montana and South Dakota.

They don't like flash — Hutterites have a strict dress code, speak German at home and place nothing on their walls but clocks and calendars — but they like their duck on Sunday.

"Each one of them has a task," said Metzger, who sells to the colonists and has visited and hosted them. "And one (person's job) is to talk to the duck-and-geese man."

Metzger learned the business from his father, who began breeding ducks as a hobby. There were 200 birds on the farm in 1978, when Metzger graduated from the University at California, Davis, and about 8,000 now.

That puts a lot of pressure on Metzger's children — Janelle, 12, Marc, 9, and Erin, 5 — if they're to keep the business growing. Is that their destiny?

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"I have no idea," Metzger said. "All I'll say is, I'm doing something different than most people do."

□ **MARTY BURLESON** is a reporter at The Californian. His column focuses on local people and appears every other week. If you would like to suggest someone for a future column, send him a note at The Californian: PO Box 81091, Salinas 93901; or call it into the Opinionline at 754-4287.