



Metzer Farms sends out about 750,000 birds each year to buyers across the United States and the world.

Duck, duck, goose

For John Metzer, fowl play is all business

By David Frey

Photography by Laura Dickinson

John Metzer may have the most adorable farm in the world.

Amid California's Salinas Valley, sometimes dubbed the "Salad Bowl of the World" for its massive fields of vegetable crops, Metzer Farms raises baby ducks and geese.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of ducklings and goslings leave the farm when they're just one day old, fluffy, fuzzy, and golden, bound for back yards and ponds across the country and around the world.

"It was a hobby of my father's," Metzer says. "When I was in college I decided maybe I could turn this into a full-time business. That was back in 1978 and I've been at it ever since."

At his 22-acre farm, Metzer raises some 14 breeds of ducks, a dozen breeds of geese, plus some wild turkeys, ringneck pheasants, and French pearl guinea fowl. Each year, he sends out some 750,000 birds by U.S. mail to buyers across the country, and by airfreight to com-



mercial buyers around the world as far as the Philippines. About half the ducks — and nearly all the geese — end up as pets, he says.

This big-time bird business is a far cry from his dad's hobby. Metzer Farms has some 6,000 breeder ducks and 2,600 breeder geese,

with females outnumbering males by about five to one. They're helping satisfy what has become a big demand for waterfowl, mostly from hobbyists who want a pet, a tenant for their pond, or something to gobble up the snails on their property. Some want duck eggs for breakfast or goose for Christmas dinner.

"I saw real potential in it," says Metzer, who not only added numbers to his father's operation, but also expanded the breeds and added his own varieties of big egg producers to the mix.

Metzer Farms ducks and geese are not caged. They're free to wander the grounds, though protective measures are taken to keep predators away.

PREPARING THE EGGS

The ducks lay their eggs every day, and every morning, the Metzer Farms crew heads out to gather them up. The eggs are washed, separated by breed and size, and then put in a cooler to keep the embryos from growing too quickly. The cooler mimics the mother bird in nature, Metzer says. Rather than sitting on the eggs as they come out, mother birds wait until they have a nestful before they settle down.

After a week of chilling, the eggs are ready for the incubator — a four-part process. Newer eggs get higher temperatures, and higher carbon dioxide levels, which aids in development. Over the days and weeks, they go to cooler incubators. Rotating trays inside the incubators help exercise the fetuses, getting them to move around inside the shell before they pop out into the world.

After 10 days, workers shine a light on the eggs — a process called "candling" — to check and see if the embryos are alive. At 17 days, they check their orders and decide how many eggs need to be hatched. At 25 days, the eggs head into the hatcher, where the air is a little more humid to make it easier for the baby birds to come into the world.

At 28 days, a new batch of baby ducks is born. The crew comes in





After chilling, incubation, candling, and rotating, the ducklings finally hatch their way into the world.

Monday morning, rolls out racks of ducklings, and bands them by gender. Having absorbed much of the moisture from the yolk, the baby birds can start their lives outside the shell without water for days. They're boxed, strapped, and sent off to the Post Office, on their way to their new homes.

Not much is wasted in the pro-



Most of Metzer's ducklings and goslings satisfy a growing demand from hobbyists who want a pet, waterfowl for their pond, or egg-laying birds for their farm.

cess. Broken eggs go into the family fridge or a local food bank. (The eggs' tough membrane keeps the egg from spoiling even if the shell is cracked.) Eggs that don't get hatched are sold for balut, a popular Filipino and Vietnamese dish of duck embryos. Some eggs are sold for salted eggs, another Asian specialty. The local Whole Foods supermarket buys some duck eggs, too. Infertile duck eggs are blown out, washed, disinfected, and sold for craftspeople to decorate.

"There's no point in throwing something away if you can turn it into something you can sell," Metzer says.

Neither ducks nor geese take well to cages, so they wander the grounds, the ducks mostly inside,

where the lights can be timed to encourage them to produce eggs year round. The geese stay outside in netted pens that keep out predators and disease, keep in flying feathers, and keep wild birds from snatching their food.

"Traditionally, people think of spring as the time to get their baby ducks," Metzer says. That's when business is heaviest, and it's the only time his geese lay eggs. About 1,000 geese get sold each year for meat, too, he says mostly at Christmas.

The ducks are busy all year, though, and for John Metzer, the idea his father hatched as a hobby has taken flight as a thriving farm. ★

David Frey writes in Glenwood Springs, Colo.

THINKING OF RAISING YOUR OWN DUCKS?

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