

# Answering the Call for Local Pasture Raised Duck Eggs

—Susan Young

One afternoon as I was buzzing through our house, the phone rang. I would typically ignore it, but for some reason I picked it up. On the other end was Sam Gelman, owner of a local Iowa City restaurant called The Webster. He found my number while searching for local duck eggs. At that time, I was selling maybe a couple of dozen a week through my regular egg delivery. Sam told me he would like to purchase up to ten dozen a week for his restaurant. I explained that my current capacity was nowhere near that number. He said he would buy from me if I would be willing to scale up. I hung up the phone and quickly started running some numbers.

I started with the Metzer Farms website to learn about the availability of commercial layers. The Golden 300s and the White Layers, Metzer's hybrid ducks, were advertised to lay between 200 – 290 eggs a year. I calculated that with a conservative lay rate, thirty birds should produce what I needed to fulfill Sam's orders.

We had a brooding coop, a portable structure for pasture raising, and some electric netting. The only new cost was the ducklings (about \$400), some feed, and time. I had been selling the few duck eggs I had for about a dollar a piece—they were difficult to find in our area. At this rate, we knew that even if the business venture did not turn out to be what we imagined, we could quickly recoup our investment and sell them off. I ordered thirty ducks the next day.

November 23, 2022, one day after we processed and sold our pasture-raised turkeys, the ducklings arrived to take their place. Brooding ducklings in the winter was a challenge. There was water everywhere. The method that worked for me was to fill a tube waterer each morning and set it onto a grate resting on a round snow sled. Any water that splashed out was mostly contained to the sled. I could empty the sled as needed. There was also a heat lamp above the waterer to help keep it thawed during the harsh Midwest winter temps.

The ducklings grew quickly and beautifully. When they were feathered and spending days outside in their run at about nine weeks, I only provided food and water in their run. The first eggs appeared mid-April, at about five months of age.

We had dinner at the restaurant one evening that winter and touched base with Sam. He assured me of his intentions and gave me a handshake. My business minded husband was a bit skeptical of this deal, but I assured him it would work.

Our first deliveries started late April. To be more in line with the needs of a commercial kitchen, we switched from cartons to flats. It was exciting to

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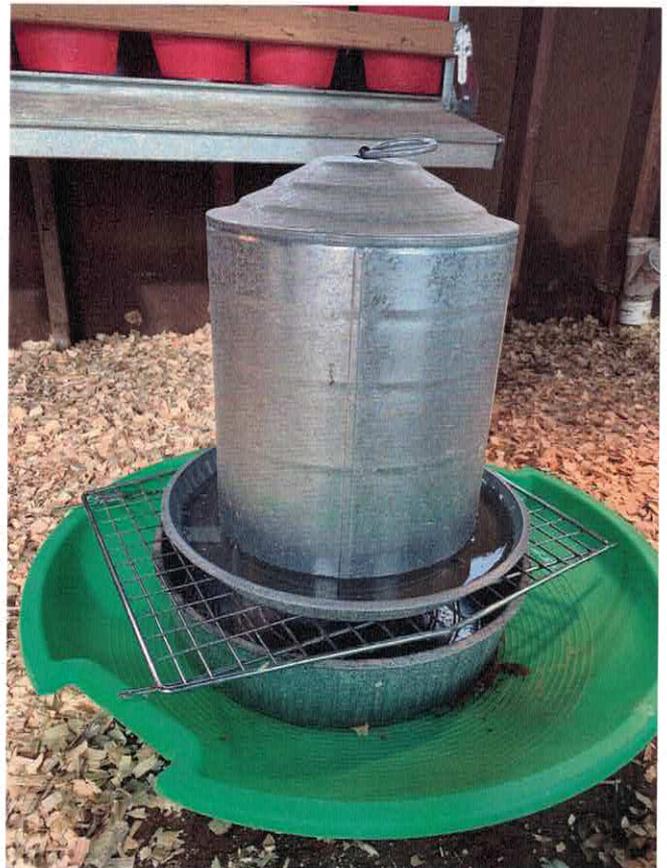


Photo by Susan Young showing the waterer setup in her brooder. The snow sled (saucer) helps keep the bedding dry.

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wheel a cooler full of eggs up the elevator and into a bustling kitchen!

Sam did not end up ordering as many eggs per week as he had originally planned, so I had to figure out a way to market the extras. I contacted other area restaurants that support local farmers and made inroads with two others.

My own customers, who had been buying pasture raised, organically fed chicken eggs from me for several years were not really on board. I offered a free six-pack of duck eggs with each two dozen chicken eggs purchased. That incentive got folks to give them a try, and now I have regular sales of flats, dozens and half dozens each week. Our local food pantry also uses allocations from the Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program to order ten half-dozens each week to provide to clients who visit the food bank.

During the pasture season here in Iowa (April – November), the ducks travel the pasture in a cattle panel hoop house surrounded with solar powered poultry netting. They lay each morning in the shelter before they are released into their paddock for the day. We feed them layer pellets, about 0.4 lbs. each, divided into two feedings per day as Metzer Farms recommends. We also provide them with an automatic waterer and an additional tub for bathing. In winter, we move them to a permanent structure and only provide food and water outside.

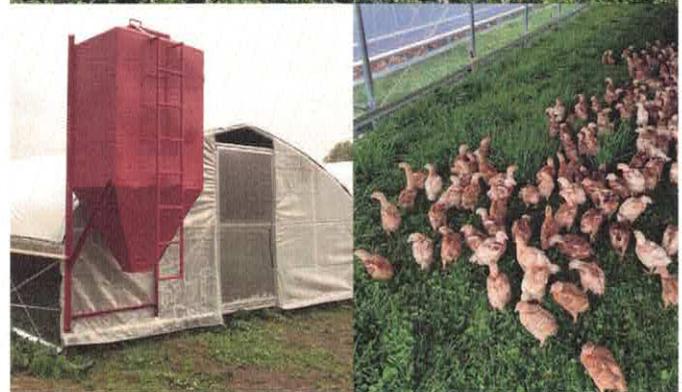
This was our first winter raising ducks, and we were not sure what to expect as far as lay rate. As the length of day shortened, the number of eggs dwindled rapidly. During the peak of the season, we typically gathered 29 eggs daily—a 100% lay rate.

This number fell to maybe five or ten eggs a day by the end of October. At that point we knew we had to rig up the supplemental lighting or risk losing our business partner. As soon as the girls were provided additional morning light, the numbers started to climb quickly. At the end of February, we are back to an 85% lay rate.

We recently had dinner at The Webster and enjoyed a delicious plate of pasta with a Lucky Star Farm duck egg. This year the restaurant was awarded “One of the Top 50 Restaurants in the US” by the New York Times and named one of the best in the country by USA Today. We are proud to be a local farm delivering eggs to such a successful restaurant.

I'm glad I picked up the phone that day and that the right partner found us. We have learned a great deal about pasture raising ducks and marketing their eggs, but it was a profitable risk that is an important and permanent part of Lucky Star Farm.

*Susan Young is a farmer at Lucky Star Farm near Iowa City, Iowa. She manages a diverse farm with pastured poultry, a raw milk dairy, and agritourism.*



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