

Duck breeder likes county's f

Gonzales man seeks wider market in U.S. for goose

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As a lone breeder of ducks and geese in the Salad Bowl of the nation, John Metzger of Gonzales is used to being different.

"Possibly, there's a big disadvantage to doing business in a live-stock-intensive area," Metzger said. "There's a greater likelihood of disease transfer."

Also, while labor, land and feed are cheaper in poultry-intensive states like Arkansas and Mississippi, you can't beat the cool, windy weather here.

"Ducks would rather have it cool than anything else," Metzger said. And unlike chickens, which drink water as a nutrient, ducks tend to use it recreationally.

"(Ducks) play in it, they track it on the dirty floor," he said. "Without the wind to dry things out, you'd run the risk of getting infected eggs."

Unlike geese, which live outside year round, Metzger's ducks inhabit a covered pen. As added insurance against infection, he has separated the small cubicles where the ducks lay their eggs from their drinking area on the other side of the pen.

A metal pipe with red rubber nipples runs the length of the ducks' drinking area, and any unconsumed water falls through the wire mesh floor to the ground below.

Several local poultry farms shut down in recent years, one in Greenfield and one in Carmel Valley, he added. But chickens were raised at both of them.

"The duck industry is pretty small worldwide, and especially in the United States," Metzger said.

Breeding geese is even more specialized. While Metzger has a flock of 8,000 ducks, his geese, which are twice the size of ducks, number about 800.

Metzger provides ducklings and goslings to pet stores and feed stores. The baby birds can become family pets, or they can stock a pond or eat snails. But more and more, they are used for meat pur-

poses, Metzger said.

"People are always looking for something different," he said.

And in contrast to the common wisdom that duck meat is fatty, ducks are bred to be increasingly lean, he added.

Beyond the duckling and gosling market, Metzger is also a large supplier of an Asian specialty food called balut. Metzger supplies balut, or partially incubated duck eggs, to Asians in the San Francisco Bay Area, and to residents of a U.S. possession in the South Sea Islands of Saipan.

"Because (Saipan) is a U.S. possession, I can send the eggs there by express mail," he said.

Normally, after the ducks lay eggs, they are stored in a closed, heated area and incubated for 28 days. Eggs must be tilted from side to side periodically, just the way a human fetus needs to move around, Metzger said.

Balut eggs are removed from incubation after 17 days and shipped to Vietnamese and Filipino grocery stores and restaurants. Metzger said he ships 10,000 to 20,000 balut eggs a week. They retail for 50 cents to 75 cents a piece.

"They're eaten as a snack or at a card party or a wedding reception," he said.

Not content to rest on his laurels, Metzger is experimenting with another new product: goose meat.

Large white geese are traditionally served during the winter holidays in Europe. The Chinese are fond of goose meat too, but geese in China tend to be smaller and darker than their European counterparts. So Metzger is attempting to breed a goose that will appeal to Chinese immigrants.

He plans to start with the San Francisco Bay Area. If he's successful there, he'll move on to other Chinese-American communities.

"In the United States we eat about 999 ducks for every goose, but in China that ratio is about one to one," he said. "So we're trying to develop a local market for goose-oriented trade."



Robert Fish/The Herald

John Metzger, a duck and goose breeder, has one of only a few such commercial farms in the U.S. His farm supports a flock of 8,000 ducks and 800 geese. The geese live outside, while the ducks live in a covered pen.

