

Duck, Duck, Goose

At Metzer Farms, they count their eggs
before they're hatched

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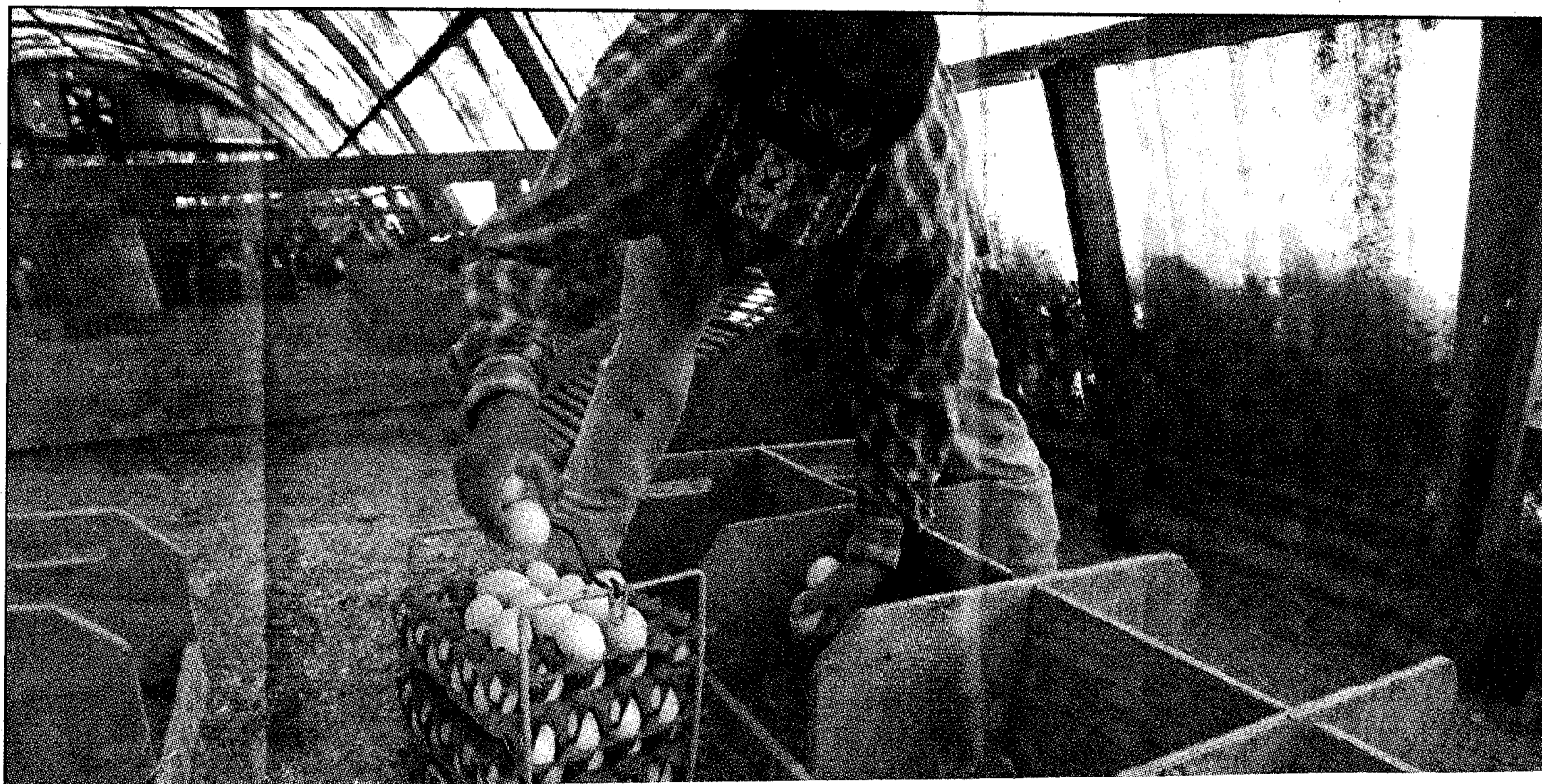
John Metzer never wanted to compete with Foster Farms' uppity chickens.

Instead, the owner of Metzer Farms in Gonzales wanted a niche in the market. And amid Salinas Valley's acres of lettuce and other row crops, he found it.

Metzer Farms is not only one of a kind in the Salad Bowl, but one of the few exotic duck and goose breeders in the country. On his 22-acre farm tucked off Old Stage Road, 9,000 ducks and 2,000 geese make their way into the world before they are sold off for meat or egg production, or as "Quackers," — family pets.

"Ducks and geese are unique. Chickens and turkeys are more of a commodity item," Metzer said. "I'm not out to produce the least expensive way I can. I have a niche."

Metzer has run the family business since 1978, taking over his father's hobby. Father and son realized the duck and goose breeding business could be very



lucrative after one customer wanted a massive order of eggs.

Metzer, who was studying animal science at UC Davis at the time, quickly changed his major to aviary studies.

Since then, the business has expanded to offer 15 different types of ducks and 12 breeds of geese. In addition to familiar mallards and pekings, Metzer Farms features such exotic species as white crested ducks with signature puffy crests of feathers on their heads that resemble white, powdered, parliament wigs and creamy white Sebastopol geese with billowy, full skirts of thick downy feathers.

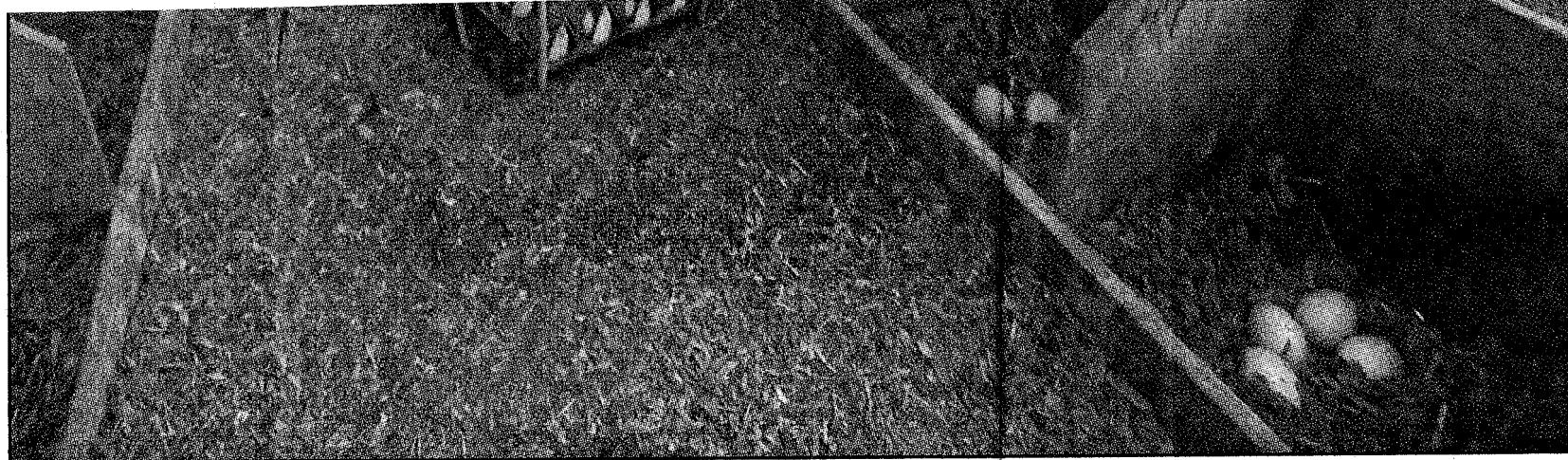
Metzer Farms breeds, hatches and ships ducklings and goslings year-round, but especially March through July. With the majority of the business concentrating on selling baby ducks, Metzer Farms sells its products worldwide to markets in Greece, the Philippines and Guatemala.

The products and breeds are truly unique, including balut, a partially incubated and formed egg that is considered a delicacy in many Asian cultures.

Metzer's is also creating a white Chinese goose that would appeal to the American-Chinese market, a task no one in this country has been able to do yet. Most of Metzer's geese are sold at 15 to 20 weeks old. But the Chinese market prefers their geese younger, at nine weeks.

"At nine weeks, they are more tender and the bones can easily be cut through with a cleaver," Metzer said. "They want the bones soft so they won't shatter."

Metzer has not been able to perfect his white Chinese goose. He had trouble getting the bird fat enough and since the birds have their first molting at seven weeks, the new feathers poking through by



ORVILLE MYERS/The Herald

Guillermo Jimenez collects duck eggs that will be washed and hatched on the farm. As soon as the eggs hatch, they are immediately shipped off to buyers. In top photo, John Metzer holds one of the unusual ducks he breeds, a white crested duck, so named because of the extra tuft of feathers on its head.

the desired nine weeks caused problems in the production plant.

"With the change in feathers, it's difficult to process," Metzer said.

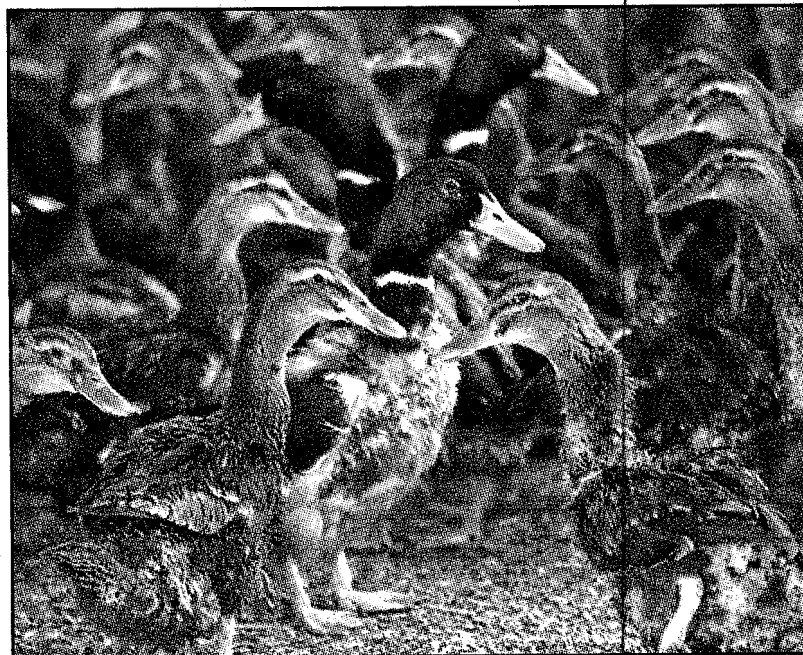
In addition to creating new products, another challenge in the breeding business is dealing with the unpredictable behavior of animals.

After the different varieties of duck and goose eggs are incubated for the required 25 days, they are placed in a hatcher on a Friday, where they will hatch for three days over the weekend. But come Monday, shipping day, not all the eggs have hatched.

"Sometimes for unknown reasons, some of the eggs just don't hatch. Then you have to make the right decision on who will get their orders," Metzer said.

Being a savvy businessman, Metzer even uses the mistakes as profit. Unhatched eggs have tiny holes punched in them, their contents thoroughly cleaned and disinfected, and then their squeaky clean shells are sold to decorators who transform them into

A little duck with that salad? Amid Salinas Valley's acres of row crops, Metzer has found a niche as a duck and goose breeder



Rouen ducks are among the exotic varieties bred at Metzer Farms.

hand-painted ornaments.

The hardest part of goose and duck breeding is not the inspections every three weeks, nor the unhatched eggs, but the universal problems all businesses face.

"Actually, my biggest difficulties are dealing with employee relations," said Metzer with a laugh.

As technology and his Web site have taken off, Metzer is also having a hard time keeping up with an inundation of questions by Internet users, such as how to hatch robin's eggs after the mama bird's nest got washed away in a pounding storm.

Although technology has changed during his 22 years in the business, one constant is the amount of pre-school students who flock to the farm to look at the birds.

The majority of the ducks and geese sold do wind up on the dinner table, but some are sold to feed stores that end up being family pets or live pond decorations.

But not for Metzer.

"No, I don't keep any ducks or geese as personal pets," Metzer said with a smile. "It's strictly business."