



Chef Mike Fisher sprinkles salt on a duck egg yolk, which he prizes for its “extremely rich and silky texture,” above. Fisher receives weekly egg deliveries from duck farmer Marc Metzer, opposite page.

Sunny-side up



Farmer-chef partnership brings duck eggs to diners' plates

Story by Matt Craggs • Photos by Richard Green

Throughout California, farmers and chefs increasingly work in partnership to support and bolster one another's professions. For restaurant patrons, this behind-the-scenes collaboration opens their palates to new tastes. Such is the case at Fisher's Restaurant & Catering in Hollister, where chef/owner Mike Fisher features an egg of a different feather: the duck egg.

Fisher began his culinary career at age 15 as a dishwasher in Hollister, his hometown. After working various positions in local restaurants, he attended Le Cordon Bleu culinary academy in Paris and worked across the U.S. in high-volume food service and a Michelin star restaurant. In 2016, lured by the region's wealth of produce, he returned to Hollister to start his own farm-to-table restaurant.

“One hundred percent of our produce is purchased from local farmers,” Fisher said. “And we use as many other local products as we can—meat, eggs, dairy.”

And for his eggs, Fisher exclusively uses local duck eggs. “The duck egg can do anything the chicken egg can,” Fisher said, noting that though he originally added duck

eggs to the menu for their uniqueness, the “bigger, bolder, silkier yolk” won him over.

Duck eggs have won over his guests as well.

“Lots of customers come in and their eyes light up. They say they'd love to try it,” Fisher said. “And (some customers) get a little scared at first. But I've never had anyone turn it away after eating it. They're very impressed by it.”

One seriously rich yolk

On Fisher's seasonal menu, guests may find duck eggs hard-boiled and crumbled on a wedge Cobb salad or soft-boiled over grilled asparagus and red onions, drizzled with balsamic vinegar.

However, Fisher prefers to leave the yolks as untouched as possible.

“I think that the duck egg has an extremely rich and silky texture in the yolk, so I try to keep the yolk runny,” he said. “I'll highlight the egg either poached or sunny-side up.”

And, as with nearly all of Fisher's ingredients, the chef works directly with the farmer, receiving weekly deliveries of fresh duck eggs.

Cooking with *duck eggs*

Chicken eggs undoubtedly reign supreme in the culinary world. But duck eggs offer variety and unique qualities in the kitchen for curious chefs to explore.

Side by side, duck eggs are noticeably larger than chicken eggs. This means a larger yolk, which is where many of an egg's nutrients are found. Chicken and duck eggs have comparable protein levels, though duck eggs are higher in iron and vitamin B-12. But it's the duck egg's higher fat content that makes it popular among chefs, particularly for desserts and baked goods.

"Every chef thinks duck eggs are the best for something different," said duck farmer Marc Metzger. "Some will say they're the best for custard or lemon meringue. Another chef will say they're really good for sauces, because they're thicker and creamier."

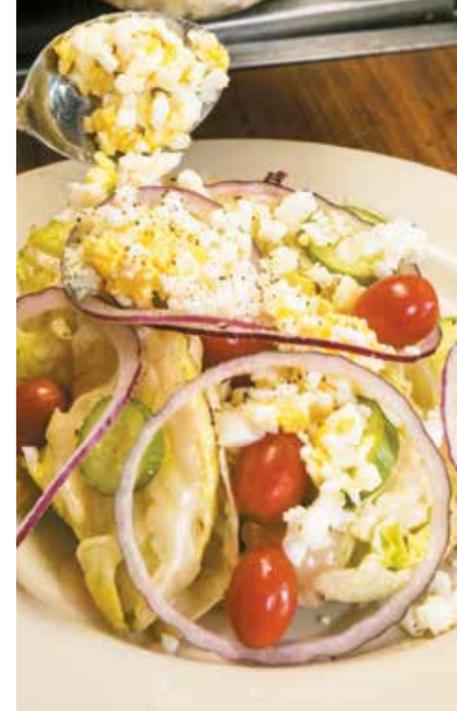
Chef Mike Fisher has found duck eggs a suitable all-purpose ingredient, using them exclusively in any preparation that calls for eggs. He said he prefers to leave the yolk runny, but duck eggs have appeared on Fisher's menu as soft-boiled, hard-boiled, in breading for calamari sandwiches, and fried atop a croque madame.

Fisher acknowledges duck eggs entered his menu for their unique appeal, but the taste quickly won over the chef—and his guests.

"The egg steals the show when it comes to the dish," Fisher said.



Marc Metzger inspects duck eggs before they go into the egg washer, left. Duck caretaker Maggie Ruelas Valencia collects eggs at Metzger's farm, above. Metzger stamps eggs, right. Fisher adds chopped hard-boiled duck eggs to a salad at his restaurant, far right.



"We're proud and eager to work with new ingredients from local providers," Fisher said. "We want to be the catalyst between these great ingredients and the customer."

That relationship makes sense to Mike Badger, director of the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association. He said he often sees a correlation between customer demand and farm production.

"Some things, like duck eggs, are driven by consumer request," Badger said. "A lot of times, it's chefs driving the requests."

When chefs become excited about a new ingredient, they tend to pass that excitement on to their guests. It's one way new ingredients enter a culture's palate.

Compared to chicken eggs, duck eggs remain a niche market. Of APPPA's nearly 650 members, 220 report chicken eggs as part of their business, while 34 report duck eggs. Badger notes that most duck-egg producers raise small flocks and sell through farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture programs, but some, such as Olinday Farms, are expanding their operations to meet the growing interest.

Chefs flock to duck eggs

In the late 1960s, Olin and Lois Metzger bought 10 acres in Gonzales and filled it with a house they called The Cabin, a garden and sheep, later introducing ducks to the property to eat the snails in the garden. When neighbors expressed interest in buying duck eggs and "balut"—a partially incubated, cooked egg found in Filipino and Southern Chinese cuisine—Olin set about turning his garden ducks into a business.

The sales didn't materialize, so Olin hatched the eggs and started a flock that would unknowingly lay the groundwork for the family business. With the help of his son, John, Olin sold duck eggs and ducklings as a hobby for years before John officially formed Metzger Farms in 1978.

Today, Metzger Farms is a 25-acre hatchery, selling eggs and hatchlings to farmers, feed stores and directly to customers. The business specializes in waterfowl with 17 different breeds of ducks and geese, including Khaki Campbell that share a bloodline with Olin's original ducks. Metzger Farms also sells pheasants and pearl guineas, though ducks continue to make up the bulk of the business.

Marc Metzger, Olin's grandson, was always involved in the family business, but wanted to add something of his own to the family tradition. After graduating college, Metzger worked as general manager of Metzger Farms, but struggled to find time to explore new business ideas until he found the same motivation that spurred Olin to begin selling duck eggs in the late 1960s: customer demand.

"(Metzger Farms was) getting calls from restaurants and distributors asking for duck eggs, in which we do zero marketing promotion," Metzger said, "and we just saw it more and more."

In 2018, Metzger created Olinday Farms—named after his grandfather Olin—at a previously vacant, 30-acre turkey ranch in Hollister with the sole purpose of producing fresh duck eggs for chefs.

As ducks tend to lay fewer eggs than chickens, Metzger selected two of Metzger Farms' exclusive breeds for Olinday Farms—Golden 300 Hybrid Layer and White Layer—and began talking to Central Coast and Bay Area chefs.

"I'm still in the 'hit the road, walk into restaurants and talk to chefs' stage," Metzger said. "It's been exciting because chefs are excited. Duck eggs are unique. I think they're relatively unknown by the general population, but many chefs have used duck eggs before and know the versatility of them."

Metzger said the response from chefs has been encouraging and, as with Fisher, his customer, they find value in the ingredient's unique appeal and being able to connect with the farmer directly when planning their menu.

"Chefs are some of the most enthusiastic and passionate group of people I've spoken with," Metzger said. "I think chefs and farmers, a lot of time, share the same type of passion, it's just that farmers are on the beginning and chefs are on the end. That's why I think collaboration nowadays is really growing and trending."

And as long as chefs and farmers collaborate to explore new ingredients and tastes, diners will remain happily in the middle. 🌱

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