

JUST DOWN THE ROAD DUCK, DUCK, GOOSE

Ramona Farm Raises Specialty Eggs

BY LAURA JONG

Imagine the sound of 14 thousand ducks quacking as you approach the gate of Ramona Duck Farm. It is this chorus and on-site farm manager, Roland Hortinela that greet us as this story begins.

The Ramona Duck Farm was started in 1989 by Roland's brother, Roger. He came to Ramona from the Philippines in search of better opportunities. Roger had raised ducks in the Philippines, so it felt natural for him to do the same in the United States. When he started the farm, Roger recognized a need not only for regular duck eggs, but for balut, which are fertilized eggs and a Southeast Asian delicacy. It was this delicacy that brought the farm immediate success.

In 1995, Thomas Dem bought the farm and continued to produce both eggs and balut. Roger went on to pursue another business, and Thomas brought on Roland to manage the farm and its employees. What Roger started with a mere 30 ducks has now grown into a whopping 12,000 ducks, geese, chickens and quail.

There are four shaded structures that house about 3,000 ducks each, with the occasional goose. Some structures hold white Pekin ducks and others are home to black Muscovy ducks; their eggs taste the same, but the Muscovy lay the pretty green-blue eggs. The ducks are shy, to say the least, as they all scatter to the other end of the pen as you walk up. However, they calm down after a few minutes and cautiously venture back towards the front. You can see how plump and healthy they are from their corn-based diet. There are feathers littered all over the ground from the ducks that are molting, but nonetheless they all look very fluffy. They are allowed to roam free within their spacious pen, and the beautiful pure-white ducks mingle with the black Muscovy ducks and geese (the small-sized quail are all kept separately).

The ducklings are bought from a farm in Northern California at just one day old. The ducklings must be kept separate from the adults



to prevent any fighting. The ducks start laying eggs when they are about six months old. They lay an egg every night in a row of nest boxes lined up along the entire side of the building, although the “lazy” ones will lay eggs in middle of the pen. The farm's six employees collect the eggs early in the morning, put them through a machine to wash and scrub the eggs, and hand pack them into 15 dozen crates.

Most of these eggs are incubated for 15–18 days in controlled temperature environments of 90–100° to produce balut, which is a delicacy savored in Southeast Asian countries, especially the Philippines. Balut is a nearly developed duck or chicken embryo that is cooked and eaten in the shell. Chicken egg balut is more common and less expensive; duck balut is a true delicacy—prized for its meatier texture and richly flavored juice, plus it is two to three times larger than a chicken egg. Unlike regular eggs, balut must first be fertilized by a male. Ramona Duck Farm uses a ratio of one male for every six female ducks.

Caring for the ducks proves to be a lot of hard work. After all, these

12,000 birds eat around a ton of food a day, kept in giant silos that constantly need to be refilled. During cold nights and all winter long, a lot of electricity is spent to keep the ducks at a toasty 90° F. Interestingly enough, the ducks will molt every year, which is a two-to three-month process during which the ducks do not lay eggs. Yet another problem the farm had to overcome! They learned to stagger the duck's molting periods so that the ducks don't molt all at once, ensuring that the farm will have eggs, and income, at all times.

It wasn't until the late '90s that the Ramona Duck Farm expanded into quail eggs. They saw the popularity of quail eggs in Japanese and Korean cultures and decided to try it out. Now, they have an entire building dedicated to quail. These birds can start laying eggs in as little as seven weeks. Since quail are substantially smaller than the ducks, the farm keeps the birds in a hanging pen with a net underneath to catch the eggs. This makes it much easier to collect them in the morning. They also tried to produce quail balut, but it never caught on.

You can't find these eggs in any store, as they are picked-up twice a week and trucked to their mother company, AA Enterprises, in Orange County. But if you feel up to the drive, you can pick up fresh eggs at the farm. You can also buy them from local produce company Specialty Produce, open to the public seven days a week.

The Ramona Duck Farm has worked hard to become the successful farm they are today, but Roland says "It's a learning process. There's always room to improve and we learn every day."

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DUCK HASH WITH POACHED DUCK EGGS

Chris Kurth, Chef de Cuisine, U.S. Grant Grill
Serves 2–4

- 2 duck eggs
- 1 yellow onion, finely diced
- 1 leek, trimmed and washed
- 6 pieces oven-dried tomatoes
- 2 sprigs Italian parsley, picked
- 1 sprig thyme, picked
- 5 tarragon leaves
- 2 cups reduced duck stock (a good chicken stock will do)
- 2 Yukon Gold potatoes, cut into ½-inch dice
- 4 duck confit legs, meat pulled from the bone
- 2 tablespoons distilled vinegar
- Butter
- Olive oil
- Salt and pepper

Sauté the potatoes in a little bit of butter and olive oil, then add the onions and caramelize. Add the leek and tomatoes next, then toss in the duck meat. Add salt and pepper to taste, then add the herbs last. Set aside.

Add the vinegar to a small pot of simmering water. Carefully crack the ducks eggs into the water and poach to your desired doneness. Remove with a slotted spoon.

Arrange your hash mixture on a plate and place the poached eggs on top. Use the reduced stock as a quick and easy sauce. If you would like an even more decadent breakfast, use your favorite Hollandaise recipe instead of the stock.

To make your own oven-dried tomatoes, split Roma tomatoes in half and season with salt, pepper and your choice of chopped fresh herbs. Place on a sheet pan with parchment paper and bake (do not use convection) at 125° for 8–10 hours.

DUCK EGG PAPPAREDELLE

Todd Atcheson, Executive Chef, California Cuisine

At California Cuisine, Chef Atcheson serves fresh duck egg papparedelle with pancetta, jumbo shrimp, English peas and foie gras butter on top.

Serves 4–6

- 2 ¼ cups bread flour
- 2 duck eggs
- 2 duck egg yolks
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt

Place flour on a clean work surface and make a well in the center. Mix the eggs, salt and oil in a separate bowl and pour into the well. Using your hands or a fork, gradually stir in the flour from the sides into the egg mixture until a dough forms.

Knead the dough for about 5 minutes until firm and elastic. (If you are not sure you have the right consistency, take a small ball of dough and stretch it thinly between your fingers. If you can see through the dough without it breaking, it's ready!)

Separate the dough into four equal balls, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for one hour.

Remove the dough and let sit at room temperature for about 30 minutes. Take one of the pasta balls and flatten it with the palm of your hand, about ½ inch thick. Set a pasta machine at its lowest (thickest) setting and pass the dough through three times. Set the machine at the next thinner setting and roll through; add a little flour if the pasta is sticking. Repeat the process, setting the machine thinner and thinner until you reach the second-to-highest setting.

Lay the pasta on a lightly floured surface and cut the length in half. Using a pizza cutter, cut lengthwise into 1-inch strips.

Fresh pastas do not need to be cooked as long as dried! Cook in a barely boiling pot of salted water for 2–3 minutes, or until tender.