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Eggs-pert Advice

How to Buy Good Eggs from Happy Hens

by Judith Fertig

Janice Cole, the author of *Chicken and Egg: A Memoir of Suburban Homesteading with 125 Recipes*, knows how delicious a really fresh egg tastes. She keeps three chickens she calls “the girls” in the backyard of her suburban Minneapolis home. “Jasmine, a white Silkie, lays small, beige-colored eggs; Keiko a black and white Ameraucana and Silver Wyandotte cross, green eggs; and Peanut, a brown, feathery Cochin mix, brown eggs,” relates Cole.

Cole has learned a lot about the natural lives of chickens. They need 14 hours of sunlight to produce eggs and lay about one per day. Chickens must be protected from predators, locked up at night in their coop for optimal well-being and let out in the morning to roam. Here are some tips for buying the freshest, most delicious and humanely raised chicken eggs.

How to Read an Egg Carton

Deciphering the language on an egg carton is a first step. Diet affects flavor. “Eggs from pasture-raised chickens allowed to roam—eating grass, worms and bugs in the backyard or a pasture—will look and taste better than eggs from chickens limited to an inside space eating chicken feed,” says Cole. “Pasture-raised eggs will have a fresh herbaceous, or grassy, flavor with an ‘egg-ier’ essence.”

“Look for the terms organic, free range or ideally, pastured or pasture-raised,” advises Adele Douglass, in Herndon, Virginia, executive director of Humane Farm

More than 90 percent of eggs sold today come from giant egg factories.

~ PETE AND GERRY'S,
AMERICA'S FIRST CERTIFIED HUMANE EGG PRODUCER

Animal Care (CertifiedHumane.org).

“USDA Organic” is a U.S. Department of Agriculture label confirming that the food the chicken ate was certified organic. “Non-GMO” indicates a diet free of genetically modified ingredients. “Free-range”, another USDA label, means the chicken had continuing access to the outdoors. “Pasture-raised” assures that the chicken roamed outdoors daily, eating what they wanted; the ideal scenario.

“Cage-free” is a USDA-regulated designation ensuring that the chickens were allowed to roam freely about within their building to get food and water. “Natural” has no real meaning says Douglass; the term invokes no USDA regulation and nothing about actual farming practices. “Certified Humane” or “Animal Welfare Approved” means that each free-range hen has at least two square feet of outdoor space; it’s the most desirable designation, says Douglass.

When farmers want to raise egg-laying chickens, they need to provide physical conditions similar to those Cole affords, but on a larger and more efficient scale, usually without the love. In regions where 14 hours of daylight are not a given, farmers use artificial lighting. When snow is too

deep for the birds to venture out and it's too cold for bug life, farmers supply indoor coops and feed. How well and humanely they do this is up to consumers to find out.

Egg Nutrition

Eating one egg a day, or moderate consumption, will not raise cholesterol levels in healthy adults, concludes a 2012 review in the journal *Current Opinion in Clinical Nutrition and Metabolic Care*. While egg yolks contain cholesterol, they also possess nutrients that help lower the risk for heart disease, including protein, vitamins B₁₂ and D, riboflavin and folate, according to the Harvard School of Public Health, in Boston. A study by Kansas State University researchers published in the 2001 *Journal of Nutrition* also found that phosphatidylcholine, another substance in eggs, can decrease the amount of cholesterol the body absorbs from them.

Plus, eggs are great sources of micronutrients and antioxidants, says Kristin Kirkpatrick, a registered and licensed dietitian and wellness manager for Cleveland Clinic's Wellness Institute, in Ohio. "I've always been a huge proponent for eggs. As lean sources of protein, they help us stay full, are easy to prepare and can be part of a healthy eating regime because

EGGS TO TRUST

Here's Humane Farm Animal Care's Adele Douglass' short list of sources for well-raised eggs.

KIRKLAND SIGNATURE ORGANIC EGGS, at Costco, are Certified Humane. While not pasture-raised, they're cage-free. Costco has partnered with several small family farms throughout the country, which guarantees peace of mind for Costco and gives these smaller purveyors a steady stream of business.

VITAL FARMS, of Austin, Texas, supplies eggs to stores throughout many of the southern and western states. They specialize in Pasture-Raised and Certified Humane eggs, produced by about 90 family farms. Recently, they pioneered a

process to make "culling" (killing non-egg-bearing male chicks) more humane.

PETE AND GERRY'S ORGANIC EGGS, headquartered in Monroe, New Hampshire, works with more than 30 family farms in Illinois, Indiana, Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Vermont. Their eggs are Organic and Certified Humane, as the chickens live in spacious barns with outdoor access.

"Most of the year, they roam outside our barns as they please on organically grown grass amid clover and wildflowers," says owner Jesse Laflamme. "At the same time, we also have to ensure our hens are safe from predators and communicable diseases from wild birds."



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they're packed with free-radical- and inflammation-fighting antioxidants." Kirkpatrick adds, "Eggs also help protect eyes. Their nutrient-rich yolks, like leafy green vegetables, are high in lutein and zeaxanthin, carotenoids that studies have repeatedly shown help protect against macular degeneration."

Ideally, all chickens would be

treated like Cole's "girls." For now, the best most of us can do is choose "Pasture-Raised," "Organic" and "Certified Humane". Getting to know more about the farmers that produce our eggs is even better.

Judith Fertig writes food health articles and cookbooks from Overland Park, KS (JudithFertig.com).