

The Harvest Table

Honoring Food from Farm to Fork

The Good Egg

by Anne Van Nest

Eggs are an inexpensive source of high-quality protein, rich in folate, vitamin B₁₂ and omega-3 fatty acids; while being low in carbohydrates. Egg yolks are also a good source of lutein, a type of antioxidant that is also found in dark green leafy vegetables, which is beneficial in preventing eye problems.

From a high point during World War II meat rationing, egg consumption has declined by almost 50 percent in the United States to a low in 1991 when mass hysteria about cholesterol levels caused people to give up eating eggs (or at least drastically cut back). The good news is that since 1991 egg consumption has steadily increased every year. The reason? Research has emerged to prop up the reputation of nature's perfect food. And the message (after more than 30 years of research) about the incredible, edible egg is that other factors have a far greater influence on blood cholesterol levels than the cholesterol in egg yolks. One study published in 2007 by the *Medical Science Monitor* showed that eating one or two eggs a day did not increase the risk of heart disease or stroke among almost 10,000 healthy people tested. This was also confirmed by another study in 2009 in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry*. Additional laboratory studies have found several peptides in cooked eggs that act like angiotensin-converting enzymes (ACE) inhibitors that may even lower blood pressure. A versatile part of any meal, it's always a good time to eat eggs.

What does that carton label really mean? For those shopping for eggs or thinking about the marketing possibilities for your own products, the choices are extensive, and deciphering the often vague and mostly unregulated labels doesn't help. So, what do the egg descriptions really mean, and which ones

should a socially responsible consumer look for to find humanely raised hens?

Here's a brief look at the world of some of the current egg marketing terms.

Free-Range or Free roaming: Hens have daily access to the outdoors. The USDA definition isn't any more specific than this. Benefit: Free-roaming means happier hens, insects to supplement their diet, fresh air and sunlight. Concerns:

Cage-Free: Free-roaming access inside of a barn. Benefit: Hens aren't in a cage. Concern: Hens are still kept in a confined area. No legal meaning in the United States.

Hen House, Nesting Hen or Barn-Laid Eggs: Just another marketing term for "cage-free."

Cage-Laid: Even though the label will never say this, if none of the above are on the egg carton label, then you can safely



How much time do they really spend outdoors? How much room do they have? Do they get any natural vegetation to eat while they are outdoors?

Free-Farmed: A designation by the American Humane Association that ensures that animals are treated humanely. Benefit: Someone has checked out this farm in the past, and annual recertification is required. The hens are raised with compassion. Concern: Are the standards still being upheld? Get to know your local farmer and judge for yourself.

assume the eggs are cage-laid. Often five hens share a cage with no room to flap their wings, forage for food, scratch or engage in any number of other natural chicken habits. Hens have their beaks trimmed to prevent their harming each other. Benefit: Mass production of eggs. Concerns: Plenty! In Austria, egg production using conventional cages is now banned, and in 2012 the EU will follow. In a similar move, Californians have voted in favor of increasing layer space requirements to a level that would make

cage egg production impractical by 2015. Ohio and other states are considering similar legislation.

Locally Raised, Farm Fresh: Produced somewhere nearby. Benefit: Fresher eggs. Concerns: No indication of how the hens are raised.

Pasture-Raised: Hens are allowed to feed on luscious pastures but are not roaming free. They are contained and are given protection in a moveable "chicken tractor" or "Eggmobile." Benefit: Lots of greens, insects, fresh air and sunlight for the hens. Concern: How much room does each hen have? Again, getting to know your local farmer is the best way to allay these concerns.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Mother Earth News compared the USDA nutrient data for commercial eggs with 14 pastured or chicken tractor flocks from around the country and found that eggs from hens raised on pasture may contain:

- 1/3 less cholesterol
- 1/4 less saturated fat
- 2/3 more vitamin A
- Two times more omega-3 fatty acids
- Three times more vitamin E
- Seven times more beta-carotene
- Three-to-six times more vitamin D

A varied pasture diet of seeds, plants, insects, worms, grain and laying mash really does produce a healthier egg. In many areas free-range, organic eggs fetch the highest price.

Enhanced specialty eggs? These eggs are higher in omega-3, vitamin E, folate or lutein because of supplements added to the hen's feed. Flax, marine algae or fish oils are added for enhanced omega-3 fatty acid content. Many enhanced omega-3 eggs are 3-6 percent higher in this beneficial fatty acid from feeding 10-20 percent flax in the hen's diet. The University of Manitoba's Department of Animal Science has developed a folate-enriched egg with up to three times as much of this essential vitamin.

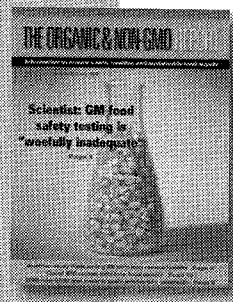
Which is better, white or brown eggs? The color of an eggshell comes from the hen breed. White eggs generally come

8 Value-Added Egg Ideas

- Sell pickled hard-boiled eggs (or hot pickled eggs). Use natural dyes (listed below) to create eye-catching colors (to match the flavors?). Perfect for brown bagging to work or school or summer picnics.
- For Easter, highlight the Ameraucana chicken eggs. These naturally colored eggs are always tinted blue-green or pink. Some vendors price them from \$4 per dozen. It's the perfect Easter egg — no need for dyeing! The shell color will be unaffected by boiling.
- Make your own Easter eggs. Use natural dyes to color the shells. Try beets, cranberries, radish, onion skins, ground turmeric, spinach leaves, red cabbage, chili powder, grape juice or strong coffee for some great natural colors.
- Blow out some real eggs and sell the shells for Easter decorating.
- Hand out your version of the perfect hard-boiled egg recipe (or Mama's deviled eggs or Dad's egg salad) with every carton sold.
- Give away "Yolk Color Charts" so your best customers can really judge for themselves how deep the colors of your pasture-raised eggs are.
- Raise a heritage breed. Preserve a critical poultry breed (as designated by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy) such as the Buckeye, Delaware, Chantecler, Andalusian or Holland. While the eggs will be similar to other breeds, the meat of these and other heritage breeds is superb.
- Decorate your egg carton for the season, with a recipe, with your slogan (e.g. "Green Grass Makes Great Eggs"), with your top 10 answers to "why organic eggs?" (Keep in mind that it's illegal to reuse egg cartons in some areas.)

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How to Hard Boil an Egg to Perfection

Select eggs that are at least five days old. Hard boiling farm-fresh eggs will result in whites that stick to the shells when peeled. The resulting egg will taste fine but look ugly. If you do have a batch that is hard to peel, put them in the fridge for a couple of days. They should peel better.

If you are planning on making deviled eggs, lay the eggs on their side (in the carton) so the yolks position themselves in the middle of the white.

Carefully put the eggs in one layer in the bottom of a saucepan. Fill with cold water until the eggs are covered by at least one inch. Bring the water to a boil over a hot element (high flame), and then reduce to a simmer. Some people add a half-teaspoon of salt to help prevent the eggs from cracking and make them easier to peel. Others say that adding salt to the water makes the whites rubbery.

At full boil, start a timer and reduce the heat. Allow the eggs to simmer and cook for an additional 10-15 minutes (depending on the size of the eggs and your doneness preference). You can also take them off the stove when they reach

the full boil, cover tightly and allow them to cook on the countertop for 15-25 minutes (depending on egg size). Watch for overcooking your hard boiled eggs — they turn green and boiling them too vigorously makes the whites rubbery.

Very important and critical to achieving peelable eggs — immediately after the eggs have finished their cooking cycle rinse or transfer them to an ice water bath. This helps the albumen (thin film inside the shell) separate from the shell. Replace the water a couple of times. Some people follow this step with a 10 second dunk into near boiling water again to help further separate the whites from the shell.

Chilling after boiling prevents the dark line from forming around the yolk (and helps prevent overcooking them). Peel and store the eggs submerged in water in the fridge for up to 3 days. Refrigerate and enjoy within five days if storing unpeeled.

If your unpeeled hard-boiled eggs get confused with the uncooked eggs spin them on a table. The uncooked ones will be wobbly.

from hens with white earlobes. Brown eggs generally come from hens with red earlobes. Does the color of the eggshell make any difference in the quality of the egg inside? Not one bit. So don't fall for the brown egg equals quaint, small farm, free-roaming, happy hen, better egg myth. A little over 10 years ago, brown eggs could only be found at the farm because all the production hens were white-egg breeds. This led to the

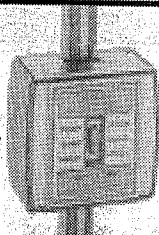
perception of the brown egg as fresh and local that persists to this day.

What causes those wonderful intensely colored egg yolks? It's all a result of the hen's diet. There's an official egg yolk rating scale that goes from 1 (off white) to 15 (almost blood red). Some people believe that you can make your yolks any color you want within that scale, under any production system, just by changing feeds. The yolk color is determined by carotenoids, natural pigments

in plants (although lutein supplements in feed will give a darker yellow yolk). The Georgia Egg Commission says that yellow corn and alfalfa meal produce medium-yellow yolks, wheat and barley yields lighter-colored yolks, white cornmeal gives an almost colorless yolk, and marigold petals can be used to enhance yolk colors.

How can you tell a fresh egg? The freshest eggs have round, firm yolks that stand tall when broken and whites that are thick and cloudy. As an egg ages, the yolk starts to flatten and break easily. Older eggs will also have whites that run on the plate and look thin and watery.

To determine egg freshness without sacrificing the egg itself, place the egg in a bowl of water. If it lies on its side, it is very fresh. If it stands up on one end, it is an older egg. As an egg ages, the air pocket inside grows and causes it to bob upright in the water. An egg that floats on the top of the water is suspicious and should be thrown away.



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