

PLANET FOOD

April 2002

EGGS

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Did you know?

*20-30 years ago, egg-laying hens would lay 200 eggs a year –
now its more like 300*

1. EDITORIAL – EGGS

My parents kept hens throughout my childhood – I loved opening the lid of the nesting boxes and picking out the warm, new laid eggs. Sometimes we would have to push off the broody hens from their eggs as they succumbed to their instincts – and we had to be careful not to get pecked. After breakfast we let the birds out of their hen house and threw them our left over porridge and bacon scraps, amongst other things. They would fight over the bacon rinds – one chicken at each end – and the victor would run off clucking in triumph.

Mass market egg production is a far cry from this. To provide for our massive consumption of eggs and for our desire for cheaper and cheaper food, egg-laying chickens have become little more than machines. They are not even the same breed of bird as they were 20 years ago, as they have been selectively bred to maximise egg production – an average of 6 a week is the industry requirement. Our chickens, by contrast, laid very little during the winter months, when there is less light.

This month I am going to look at what's behind egg labelling and why some chickens are de-beaked and others not, as well as interview a large scale organic egg producer.

2. CHICKENS AND EGGS

Which egg?



I have always found it difficult differentiating, between the different terms used to describe eggs. This is not surprising because many of them were invented to disguise the fact that the eggs were intensively produced. One supermarket, for example, was found to be charging considerably more for its 'fresh eggs' than its 'value battery eggs' when actually they were exactly the same!

There has been recent negotiations at the European Commission to come up with some standardised descriptions for all eggs. The Commission did not get through its original proposal, which was to include one description of 'nest eggs from enriched cages'. This means the cage contains a nest box, perch and a scratch area for the hens – still a cage! What they finally agreed to was:

- eggs from caged hens: they must have a minimum of 550cms per bird
- barn eggs: they have 1100cms per bird and can roam around a shed.
- free-range eggs: they have the same space as the barn egg chickens indoors but must also have 4 metres squared outside.

And then there's organic eggs. Many people apparently wonder why organic eggs don't say that they are 'free-range'. In fact all organic eggs are free-range as part of their organic criteria but they may now be labelled as such to overcome this confusion.

However the standards for organic eggs has been quite controversial because they vary considerably. The Soil Association are the most stringent – they require about double the space per bird as conventional systems and their standards also mean that hen houses have to be moved around to fresh pieces of ground on a regular basis.



Non Soil Association organic eggs are an improvement on free-range. But for my money I think that if you are going to pay a premium for organic eggs, you might as well go for the best and ignore the 'half way house' approach.

Pecking order

Some people think that selectively breeding chickens to increase egg production, has inadvertently increased their aggressive nature. This is a major head-ache for chicken producers because the birds will peck at each other and if cannibalism takes hold, they have no choice but to kill off the whole flock.

Decreasing the lighting in sheds apparently calms the birds down, but the animal welfare lobby don't like this because they say it harms their eyes and diminishes their quality of life. They are also unkeen on the idea of de-beaking birds because they regard this as mutilation of a farm animal – organic systems ban the practice.

“The bottom line is if you can get birds on the range 90% of your problems will go away”

One innovative approach to this problem is to re-introduce the cockerel. One cock per twenty hens apparently changes the pecking order and stops the birds attacking each other, as well as encourages the hens to go outside – they follow the cock. But this is not yet a common practice, in part because, introducing the cock means that eggs will get fertilised. So the cocks have to be castrated or 'wethered', which the animal welfare activists don't like.

Another idea, which has been successfully applied by one leading supermarket is to selectively breed hens that are more suited to free range conditions, and therefore less prone to peck. The challenge has been to maintain productivity at the same time.

3. EGG PRODUCER

NEW ORGANIC VENTURE

Giles and Angela Greenhough set up their large-scale organic egg farm only three years ago.

“We set up the whole thing from scratch”

Giles and Angela Greenhough have 2 dogs and 6,800 chickens. They follow Soil Association organic standards. I talked to Giles.

“It's easy from a producers point of view to justify the cost of organic eggs” he says. Feed is double the price and the organic standards require about double the space per bird. So at a very basic level the costs are at least twice as much. It also requires more labour because it is difficult to have the same degree of mechanisation when you have moveable hen houses. Eggs need to be collected by hand rather than being plopped into a nesting box and then passed onto a conveyor belt en route to the packing area.

I asked Giles why he decided to go for Soil Association standards. He said that it was because of the integrity of the standard and the fact that it had a good reputation. Giles thinks that people who choose to go this route tend to really believe in what they are doing and although this might be more

work and more expensive, it pays off. Egg farmers who have merely tried to switch from conventional free range to organic, with least possible effort and cost have not found it easy. It may be their lack of real commitment that makes it difficult to keep going – many have reverted.

The Greenhough's chickens are *Columbian Black tails*, which are a robust and hardy breed, bred specifically for free range conditions. This means they are more likely to range, less likely to get bored or stressed and therefore less prone to pecking each other. They say that Soil Association guidelines also help them tackle this. But all chicken feed today cannot include meat – this was made law post BSE – and depriving chickens of the amino acids from meat may actually aggravate their inclination to peck each other.

Organic producers are banned from using artificial amino acids because of the process used to make them and so are currently forced to use fish meal. Giles says that 2% of their feed is fish meal. But recognises that this is not a long term sustainable solution to the problem, given the pressures on fish. He and I agreed that large-scale wormeries may be needed to provide the vital protein in feed but this could raise some people's hackles as they have come to expect chickens to be vegetarians. Like humans and pigs, they are actually omnivores!

Did You Know

Chickens are being made into vegetarians in response to consumer concerns.

Giles' philosophy is that 'happy hens lay more eggs', so he feels that his commercial interests go hand in hand with his organic principles. If we as consumers agree with these principles, we have to be prepared to pay the premium!

4. EGG CONTACTS

COMPASSION IN WORLD FARMING

01730 264 208 / www.ciwf.co.uk

ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF ANIMALS (RSPCA)

Freedom Foods

SOIL ASSOCIATION 0117 929 0661 / www.soilassociation.org