

Space Requirements

Whether laying hens should be confined to tight spaces or cage-free is part of a larger discussion about animal welfare.

By Clare Leschin-Hoar

Take in a meal at La Laiterie in Providence, R.I., a restaurant known for its commitment to local and sustainable products, and you'll very likely have egg incorporated into your dish in some way. Whether it's rolled out in the handmade pappardelle topped with a sunny-side-up version, blended into housemade pâtés or whipped into voluminous meringue desserts, eggs' presence on the menu is prevalent.

Chef/owner Matt Jennings buys nearly 10 dozen farm eggs a week from two local producers specifically because of their superior flavor profiles and their excellent performance. "They're fantastic," he says. "It doesn't make sense to hear, but they're the egggiest eggs you've ever had."

But at \$3 a dozen, the cost in the quantities that the restaurant requires gets prohibitive quickly, which is why Jennings also places orders for two cases (180 eggs per case) of bulk eggs each week.

"I'd like to use the farm-fresh eggs in everything, but we can't financially do that. You have to choose your battles with some of these ingredients. That's always the challenge for restaurants that want to do the right thing," he says.

The American Humane Association certifies cage-free eggs under the "American Humane Certified" label.

John des Rosiers, chef/owner of Inovasi in Lake Bluff, Ill., just outside Chicago, takes a different approach. The restaurant is raising 250 hens with the help of a local farmer, and they are tightly controlling feed and the environment in which the birds are raised. The flock provides 90 dozen eggs to the restaurant each week, at approximately \$3.60 per dozen, double the amount des Rosiers says he would have to pay to a wholesaler.

"The biggest reason we raise them is for taste. Flavor is first," he says. "During the winter, the hens have half a greenhouse covering them so they don't freeze, but in the warmer months, they graze on pasture in an open field of alfalfa and clover, eating bugs, worms, everything."

For des Rosiers, eggs are 2% of what he spends on food, and he believes it's a not corner that needs cutting. "Even if eggs are expensive, it's not going to be a large percent of your budget. You wouldn't think twice about spending an extra dollar or two a pound for meat," he says.

Battle brewing

On the micro level, Jennings' battle is one of cost control, while des Rosiers' decision to take his egg production in-house is one of quality control. But broaden that view to a wider screen and you'll notice that a much bigger battle is brewing. Eggs, used in everything from classic eggs Benedict to tasty gin flips, have more recently become a political lightning rod between producers and animal activists, with impassioned arguments supporting both sides.

In November 2008, California's Proposition 2 drew nationwide attention to the way farm animals (including laying hens) were housed. The pictures weren't pretty. Web-based videos of male baby chicks being ground up alive and newly hatched birds being debeaked by automated machinery began to surface, as did images of dust-filled barns and hens packed a dozen-plus to a cage, making it difficult for nearly anyone to separate emotion from the issues.

Proposition 2 passed with 63.5% of the vote, which means that by 2015, all farmed hens in the state must be able to lie down, stand up and fully extend their wings without touching another bird, though what that will mean for exact space requirements is still murky. Since then, similar legislative action has been taken in Michigan. In Ohio, which ranks second behind Iowa in egg production, 64% of voters were in favor of a constitutional

amendment that would create a new state Livestock Care Standards Board that would set standards for farm animal welfare. Industry watchers expect to see more legislative action in states such as Iowa, Maine, Florida, Oregon, Colorado and Arizona in the next few years.

At the heart of the issue is the amount of space each hen is allowed. Most caged hens are currently allotted 67-76 square inches, an amount that animal welfare activists say is smaller than a single sheet of paper. Cage-free hens are given 144-216 inches per bird. Producers say increasing the space per bird will not increase productivity, but, rather, will lead to higher prices for an important protein

Inovasi raises 250 hens with the help of a local farmer. This egg and chanterelle-mushroom custard with Chinese cabbage and a vanilla miso sauce benefits from the 90 dozen eggs the flock provides to the restaurant each week.



FEATURES

Certification programs

Animal Welfare Approved—
www.animalwelfareapproved.org/

Animal Welfare Institute

This standards program uses the “Five Freedoms” as goals that farmers aim to achieve in the care and handling of their animals.

American Humane Certified™—
www.americanhumane.org/protecting-animals/programs/farm-animals/

American Humane Association

Gives information about the American Humane certification program for animal production facilities.

Certified Humane Certification Program—www.certifiedhumane.org/
Humane Farm Animal Care

Nonprofit group provides inspection, certification and labeling program for

meat, poultry, egg and dairy products from animals raised to humane care standards.

United Egg Producers Certified—
www.uepcertified.com/

United Egg Producers

A voluntary program in which companies may become United Egg Producers Certified if they meet certain requirements, including implementing the Animal Husbandry Guidelines for U.S. Egg Laying Flocks.

FoodAlliance.org—
www.foodalliance.org/

This nonprofit organization operates a third-party certification program for sustainably produced food. Certified ranchers and farmers must also ensure the health and humane treatment of animals.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

source for many at-risk consumers. They also argue that the cost of converting current cage systems to cage-free is prohibitive, and will undoubtedly put many farmers out of business.

Peter Skewes, a researcher in the Animal and Veterinary Science Department at Clemson University, Clemson, S.C., is currently studying caged and cage-free housing of hens to assess the welfare of the birds. “The cage-laying hen is one of the most intensively managed practices in animal agriculture (followed closely by pigs). That means they have the least amount of space per animal, and that’s why there’s a lot of interest in it,” he says.

Egg consumption

Alpharetta, Ga.-based United Egg Producers (UEP) members sell nearly 97% of all the eggs produced in the U.S., and have been facing intense political pressure by groups such as Norfolk, Va.-based PETA and The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Washington, D.C., which actively lobbies against confinement husbandry of all kinds, including laying cages.

While many chefs, particularly those in the fine-dining sector, tout eggs from local farms on their menus, 95% of the 78 billion eggs produced in the U.S. are from birds raised in caged systems. Eggs



United Egg Producers

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from cage-free and free-range hens make up 5% of egg production, and are still considered specialty items.

The HSUS has been pushing to convert more farms to cage-free production while campaigning for large purchasers of bulk eggs to move toward cage-free versions. Its Web site boasts a list of companies, including Red Robin, Wendy’s, Compass Group and Carl’s Jr., that have agreed to purchase all or a portion of their eggs from cage-free sources. More recently, the group is purchasing stock in restaurant chains, including Steak ‘n Shake, Jack in the Box and Domino’s Pizza, in an effort to create change by shareholder mandate. According to HSUS press releases, the group “intends to use its stockholder position to move the company toward

moving away from eggs from caged hens, pork from crated pigs, and poultry from producers that use a particularly cruel but standard method of slaughter . . .”

For UEP, the issue has grown into a public relations nightmare. “We are committed to doing things science tells us, but science isn’t sexy,” says Gene Gregory, UEP president. “It’s much easier [for groups like the HSUS] to convey that all animal agriculture is bad.”

Simply complex

UEP says changing over the industry to cage-free production is not environmentally friendly, will increase the cost of eggs—an important protein source for Americans who are at the poverty level—and could affect food safety surrounding eggs. Gregory says his organization uses science-based

These egg-laying hens are confined inside battery cages, which provide each bird with less space than a sheet of letter-sized paper.



methodology to study distress, mortality and the physical well-being of the hens.

Other animal rights groups, such as the Denver-based American Humane Association, have tackled the issues surrounding egg production from a different angle. It has begun certifying cage-free eggs under the label “American Humane Certified.”

“The egg itself isn’t complex. It’s a simple, beautiful form of food” says Kathi Brock, director of strategic partnerships, American Humane Certified.

But if the egg isn’t complex, the myriad labels that adorn egg cartons can be confusing, from American Humane Certified’s red barn

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and blue sky logo to the simple green and white Certified Humane box to United Egg Producers own self-certification logo—each with different program requirements that address access to the outdoors, beak trimming, caged or cage-free housing and more. Add terms such as “organic,” “vegetarian,” “conventional,” “free-range” or “cage-free,” and the simple egg doesn’t seem quite so simple anymore.

“At one point in history, we didn’t care about the welfare of people, but we changed our ways. Now we’re beginning to think about animals” says Skewes. “It’s an emotional issue. Even if the science says the welfare of the hens is fine, people will still look at the two and make it an emotional issue and decide if cages are right or wrong. Science can take the emotion out of it, but the end user will likely put the emotion back in.”

Mansfield, Mass.-based freelance writer Clare Leschin-Hoar’s work has appeared in The Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe and The Christian Science Monitor, among other publications.

