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## EATER AT LARGE

BY SUSAN YAGER

# INCREDIBLE EDIBLE EAST END EGGS

*For fresh and tasty, look no further.*



SHELTER ISLAND—M.F.K. Fisher wrote that “the finest way to know that the egg you plan to eat is a fresh one is to own the hen that makes it.” Mary Francis decided to forego breeding chickens and just seek out an excellent purveyor, but I would choose to raise them if I could.

I’ve wanted chickens for a long time, just a few contented birds that peck away at the ground, spread their wings, and do whatever it is chickens like to do. Every day or so each would lay one delicious protein rich oval filled with vision-protective carotenoids, bone-enhancing vitamin D and immune system boosting Omega-3’s. Unfortunately, the covenants of my section of Shelter Island restrict me to household pets, so I have to leave home to find eggs that are truly farm fresh.

One place that sells them is Udder Farm on the road to the Island Boatyard (right after the “goat crossing” sign). On a warm spring day, this charming little family farm is a pleasant walk from my house. There are always a few chickens wandering around, and sometimes a dozen eggs will be in a cooler out front. The last time I got a carton (\$3, on the honor system) a hen walked over and pecked my ankle. The supply here is clearly limited, but the East End has several excellent, and larger, alternatives. Keep your eyes open for hand-lettered “Fresh Eggs” signs, or your ears open for consistent clucking, and you might find your own local connection.

If you do, feel free to ask the farmer to see the chickens. City folk (like me) tend to believe that small farmers treat their animals with more respect and compassion than their larger counterparts, and this is usually but not always true. At one North Fork roadside stand the woman behind the counter ominously told me that “no one was

allowed to see the chickens,” and that the couple of birds walking around the place were “only for show.” A South Fork poultry farmer showed me his “cage-free” chickens—they were so tightly packed together that a cage might have been an improvement; the birds could barely move in their poorly ventilated, almost windowless coop.

Ideally, here’s the way it should be. Chickens should be pastured, weather permitting, which means they have ample room to walk around, experience sunshine, and eat grass, grit and microorganisms from the earth along with supplemental feed free of animal by-products and antibiotics. At Iacono Farm in East Hampton they have all

that in abundance. Sal and Eileen Iacono started raising poultry in 1948; today their son Anthony joins them in the business. They have about 1000-1100 laying hens, an assortment of Rhode Island Reds for brown eggs, and White Leghorns for white. (Feather color determines egg color. There is no nutritional difference between the two.) Iacona sells a variety of sizes, including pullet, small, medium and large. They are not certified organic, but use no chemicals, hormones, or antibiotics, and add oyster

meal for supplemental calcium, which means nice, hard shells. On a sunny day it is pleasant to watch the birds pecking around, just being chickens. The family has been raising them the same way for almost 50 years. (On Long Lane, East Hampton, look for the hanging wooden cut out of a chicken. Open Monday–Saturday 9:30–noon and 1–5 p.m., Sunday 10–noon. Closed Tuesday.)

Heading east on Sound Avenue in Mattituck, it’s difficult to miss the rustic sign for Ty Llwyd Farm that lists, among other things, “Fresh Brown Eggs.” David and Elizabeth Wines have been raising



DeKalb Golds, a Rhode Island Red variety, for over 30 years on a farm that has been in David's family since 1870. The chickens, cage-free in spacious wire pens, are able to walk outside the fenced areas as they wish. The birds are fed antibiotic- and hormone-free diets of home grown wheat mixed with cracked corn, soy and fish meal, and have ample roosts to lay their eggs in privacy. (Three huge roosters really do rule the roosts.) There are also some ducks and geese waddling about. I was there one afternoon when two young men drove up and asked about buying a goose. "Food or pet?" Elizabeth asked, and when the guys answered "pet," Elizabeth seemed pleased and said, in her lovely Welsh accent, "Then you should buy two. They like the company."

Limited demand makes free-range duck eggs difficult to find on the East End. A small supply is available here in spring, summer, and fall, produced by three resident pet ducks (and one merry drake). They cost 50 cents each. (5793 Sound Avenue, Mattituck. Open daily, except Sunday and Christmas, but the eggs often sell out early. By the way, *Ty Llwyd* means brown house in Welsh.)

Caroland Farms, on Carroll Avenue in Peconic, might not have a dozen eggs, but then their 50 or so Rhode Island Reds only produce a couple of dozen eggs a day, and they sell fast. It's worth a try if you're nearby, because even if the cooler is empty, Stacy and Walter Marczewski's adorable miniature pony and cute little goats are a delight. The chickens, along with a large rooster and one lone duck, are kept in an enclosure for safety, but allowed to range free under supervision during the day. (1850 Carroll Avenue, Peconic. Honor system.)

Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht's parents bought some beautiful North Fork farmland in the 1970's. In 2001, Eve and her fiancé (now husband) Chris, both environmental activists, renamed the land Garden of Eve. Their current wide variety of vegetables, flowers and herbs are certified "transitional" organic and will be certified "organic" in 2007; their pastured laying hens (a Rhode Island Red/White Rock cross) provide sustainable fertilizer for those crops. The hens are fed a high quality antibiotic- and hormone-free vegetarian mix, but, Eve noted, it is not organic. Eggs are sold by the dozen, ungraded. (4558 Sound Avenue in Aquebogue, at the intersection of Northville Turnpike and Sound Avenue. Daily 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Memorial Day–Halloween.)

Last spring, Maureen Culliname lost her entire flock to fox. She even lost her surviving rooster when, lonely for female companionship, he literally crossed the road to permanently move in with a neighbor's chickens. Maureen, who believes that the flavor of eggs changes with the seasons, peaking in summer when the grass is green and plentiful, allows her new flock to wander freely inside a fenced-in horse pasture during the afternoon, weather permitting, as long as it's not when the fox are raising their young. Otherwise, the assorted mixed bantams, bred for their small size, along with some Rhode Island Reds and comical little Bantam roosters, range and strut all day in a large fenced and covered coop. Although not certified organic, the chickens are fed an organic high protein corn and wheat mix from a Vermont supplier. (Her "Good Eggs" are available at the Orient



## COOKING WITH UNUSUAL EGGS

One of the view disadvantages—if you can call it that—of non-factory eggs is a lack of consistency in size. On your egg-finding missions, you may come across pullet eggs, which are from "adolescents" of about 18-30 weeks old and quite small, or you may find jumbo eggs which look like they could hatch Baby Huey. This really makes little difference when cooking, but baking is formulaic. (At one time recipes were frequently based on "egg weights"—that is, the baker weighed the eggs first, and then weighed out the correct proportions of flour, leavening and liquid.)

Here's all you need to know for avoiding mishaps. Most recipes call for "large" eggs, and if size isn't mentioned, large is assumed. One large egg is 2 ounces, or  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup liquid. When uncertain about your eggs, measure. If the recipe calls for, say, 2 eggs, measure until you get  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup liquid.

Country Store, 930 Village Ln., Orient, and Sang Lee Farms at 25180 Country Road 48, Peconic.)

I consider myself fortunate not to have to buy eggs at the supermarket. A dozen eggs costs about \$1.79 and represents factory farming at its most insidious. There are few food products where the differences between the small local farmer and agribusiness are so extreme. Prior to World War II, most egg production came from independent farm flocks of less than 400 hens. Of the 76 billion table eggs produced in the United States in 2004, over 95 percent came from factory farms with flocks of 750,000 or more.

These laying hens are called, in the industry, hens “dedicated” to producing eggs, a euphemism suggesting that chickens confined to wire cages about the size of this page, without ability to peck the ground, lay eggs in privacy, see daylight, or live a life that is in any remote way natural to their species, are contented workers with a mission. The American Egg Board states on its website: “Today’s laying hen doesn’t need to depend on the fickle sun to tell her when laying time has arrived.” Of course not, she lives her life as a machine, in a windowless factory where the “intensity and duration of light can be adjusted to regulate production.” She isn’t allowed to naturally molt (replace old feathers with new), but is, instead, “force molted” (starved for 5 to 14 days at a time to replace feathers more frequently, stimulating greater egg production.) These inhumane and unhealthy living conditions result in sick birds; thus an abundant use of antibiotics is necessary, which

you ingest as well.

One of the wonderful things about not treating farm animals like machines is that what they produce becomes unique to them and to the land. In viticulture this influence of location is known as terroir, I would argue that terroir, along with, of course, compassion and respect, has an effect on everything from the earth. Every farmer I spoke to said that they believed contented chickens produce better tasting eggs, and from my personal experience this is true. The flavor will be eggier, that is, richer and deeper, and the egg will have a thick translucent white and brightly colored yolk that stands up when cracked onto a plate or pan. You will notice that baked goods not only have better flavor, but more intense color. There is simply no comparison between a battery egg and one freshly laid from a local hen.

If local eggs are not available when you need them, try to substitute ones that are free-range, organic, and fresh. Here’s how to decode a supermarket carton: according to Christopher Kimball in *The Kitchen Detective*, those three mysterious numbers stamped on the carton indicate the day the eggs were put into it, using the Julian calendar. So, 001 is January 1, and 365 is December 31. This is a far better indicator of freshness than the arbitrary “sell-by” date. For optimal flavor, try to use any eggs within three weeks after they are laid. If you are unsure about freshness, simply put eggs in a large bowl of cold tap water and if they float, don’t use them. □

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