

All About Eggs

Contributed by Justme and other downsizers

Buying and selling, that is. Watch this space for cooking.

“Free range”, “Organic”, “Farm fresh”: There are lots of terms used to describe the eggs that you buy. Some are legally defined terms, while others are meaningless euphemisms that suggest a happy, bucolic laying environment that is often far, far from the truth. The following is a guide to buying eggs, what the descriptions really mean and how to identify the different types. There is also a brief run-through of the regulations that govern the sale of eggs for small egg producers.

The bulk of this article refers to hen eggs; other eggs including duck, goose and quail eggs are not governed by the regulations described below, so you will need to make your own enquiries as to the animal welfare standards employed in their production. Quail eggs, for example, will almost certainly be produced in a highly intensive production system. All of the following is specific to hen eggs unless otherwise indicated.

Buying Eggs

Egg Designations

There are many variations including some rare breed and "woodland" eggs, we'll only discuss the 4 basic types here:

Organic

These generally have the highest welfare standards, governed not by law but the conditions laid down by the certifying body (Soil Association, Organic Farmers & Growers, etc). These all exceed the government's Free Range standards and should also guarantee that the feed and drug regimes are more "natural".

All the others are defined by law and the following definitions are from DEFRA's website.

Cage

A cage system consists of tiers of cages. The cages have sloping mesh floors so that the eggs roll forward, out of the reach of the birds to await collection. For each cage there must be at least 10 cm of feed trough/bird and at least two drinkers/cage or 10 cm of drinking trough/bird. Droppings pass through the mesh floors onto boards, belts or into a pit to await removal. A minimum of 550 cm² per bird is required in standard cages which were installed prior to 2003.

Since 2003, only installation of enriched cages is allowed, with a minimum of 750 cm² per bird, along with a nest, perching space at 15cm/bird and a scratching area. In each cage feeding troughs must be at least 12cm/bird and at least two nipple drinkers or two cups must be

within easy reach of each hen (where nipple drinkers are provided).

Barn

The barn system has a series of perches and feeders at different levels. The maximum stocking density is 9 birds per square metre and there must be at least 250 cm square of litter area/bird. Perches for the birds must be installed to allow 15 cm of perch per hen. There must be at least 10 cm of feeder/bird and at least one drinker/10 birds. There must be one nest for every 7 birds or 1 square metre of nest space for every 120 birds. Water and feeding troughs are raised so that the food is not scattered

Free range

In free-range systems, the birds are housed as described in the barn system above. In addition birds must have continuous daytime access to open runs which are mainly covered with vegetation and with a maximum stocking density of 2,500 birds per hectare.

In all systems the birds must be inspected at least once a day. At the end of each laying period the respective houses are completely cleared and disinfected.

Egg Marks

The basic marks on all but ungraded eggs will be something like this:

1-UK-1234501

1= Production method (1–Free Range, 2-Barn, 3-Cages, 0-Organic)

UK= Country of origin

12345= Supplier Code

01= Optional identifier for flock, barn etc

Lion Mark

This is a supplementary mark indicating that the producer is a member of the British Egg Industry Council, this mark is essentially about traceability and hygiene, although welfare is also supposed to be above the minimums set out by law. More information on the Lion Mark can be found here:

<http://www.britegg.co.uk/lionquality05/lionquality2.html>

Egg Sizes

New Size Weight Old Size

Very Large 73g +over Size 0 Size 1

Large 63 - 73g Size 1 Size 2 Size 3

Medium 53 - 63g Size 3 Size 4 Size 5

Small 53g+ under Size 5 Size 6 Size 7

So Just How Fresh are They?

Dates on egg boxes give a rough indication of how old the eggs are. The maximum 'best before' date is 28 days after laying. Eggs must be sold (delivered to the consumer) no more than 21 days after laying.

Selling Your Own Eggs

When you bought that dozen cute hens, you didn't do the sums on how many eggs you would need per week. So you now have a surplus to sell. What options are available to you?

Farm Gate Sales

The rules are fairly simple IF you only ever sell them by the method know as 'farm gate sales'. This means that the eggs are sold ungraded or sized. They should also be clean (but not washed) and without any cracks. You will need to display a 'best before' date; 4 weeks is the accepted time limit. Small-scale producers will rarely have any eggs over a few days old, so "best before 3 weeks from date of purchase" is a good compromise.

Other Sales Methods

As soon as you sell them by any other method you need to start following a few basic rules. Even if you are selling them in person on a Country Market stall, at a farmers' market or at work, you still need to follow the rules below:

1. You are not allowed to grade or size the eggs.
2. You must have a producer number, available from the Egg Marketing Inspectorate for free. This number also indicates your production type (organic (0), free range (1), barn (2) or, heaven forbid, cage (3)).
3. Eggs must be marked with your producer number. Each egg must be marked individually. Cheap hand stamps are available, but you can just write the number on if your egg sales are so low it's not worth the cost of the stamp. You need to ensure that any inks you use are food-safe.
4. You cannot sell to catering establishments.

5. All sales of eggs must be in NEW boxes. The only way you can allow customers to reuse their own boxes is if you display the eggs in large trays and the customer chooses to put them into their own used boxes. You should not have a supply of used boxes available for people to use.

Packing Station

If you have more than 350 hens and sell eggs you must register as a packing station.

Below this flock size registration is optional unless you wish to sell to catering establishments (pubs, restaurants etc.), or wish to sell your eggs as sized/graded. (There is a registration exemption for chicken keepers who run a B&B on the same site as they keep their flock.)

Registration is not to be undertaken lightly as it adds considerably to your costs, both for equipment and space.

Links

Link about the Egg Marketing Inspectorate on the Defra site:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodrin/poultry/trade/emi/index.htm>

Egg marking and packaging equipment is available from here.