

Which Eggs Are Ethical to Eat?

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I love having conversations about chickens. Luckily, I get to chat about chickens quite often though my work as an animal advocate, but my joy can turn quickly to frustration as I am often get asked which eggs are ethical to eat. People are always cooking up potential scenarios, “What if it’s from my local, natural foods store? They research and only buy the best of the best” or, “If the eggs are from the farmers market, then it’s okay, right?” or, “If it’s a neighbor’s chicken, or my own chicken, and I know that she is having a good life and won’t be killed, can I eat the eggs?”

The answer to all of these possible situations is “No”. Here’s why: As long as eggs are considered food, hens will be considered a food production unit. Even if there is this implausible, rare, ideal circumstance where the hen is actually in totally humane conditions (and if you are buying an egg, it is almost assuredly that this is not the case), there is no way we could feed over seven billion people this way. It simply can’t be done profitably.

We must stop looking at the chicken’s eggs, and her flesh for that matter, as food. We cannot consider animals as commodities any more. No matter how ethical one operation wants to be – mistreatment, abuse, misery, and corruption will exist in another. We must end the use of animals as food.

BUYING EGGS FROM THE NATURAL FOODS STORE OR FARMERS MARKET

If you are buying eggs from a health food store or even a farmers market, no matter the size of the farm or the label on the carton, there are hidden cruelties that are economically necessary to making income on eggs.

Egg farms can’t profitably hatch their own chicks. They purchase chicks from huge, heartless hatcheries where the baby birds are hatched not in a warm nest with a mother hen’s love and affection, but rather they are thrust into a frightening world of conveyer belts and metal machinery, roughly tossing them about like inanimate objects. The males don’t grow fast enough to be profitable for meat, so they are killed just hours after hatching by the millions. Thrown away alive in dumpsters outside the hatcheries to slowly die of exposure and dehydration or ground up alive in maceration machines for fertilizer or other products.

Just because there is a label on the eggs that says “humane” or “cage-free” or “free-range” almost certainly does not mean that these hens lived a happy life. Many of these farms are still over-crowding debeaked hens in windowless warehouses where they suffer in filth.

A small cage-free or free-range farm will not be able to feed all the chickens whose egg production has waned. They can't profitably “retire” hundreds of hens, so birds who are only a couple years old will be killed by brutal methods such as slow and painful gassing, being buried alive, and throat slashing when they could (and want to) live many more years of life.

GETTING EGGS FROM A NEIGHBOR OR SMALL FARM “DOWN THE STREET”

There may be scenarios where someone is able to get eggs from a neighbor or a small farm in their area. And perhaps the hens appear to be living the “good life” on this farm or in a backyard. Why can't we eat these eggs? First of all, you don't know the whole story. Even a neighbor could have purchased the chicks from a feed store or from mail order, thereby giving money to the cruel hatchery industry and subjecting newborn chicks to the horrors of being shipped through the mail. The only ethical way to obtain a chicken is to adopt her from a sanctuary or shelter, or rescue her from a bad situation.

It originally said “rescue her from a sanctuary, humane society, or from a bad situation” but do we really want to imply that the poor chicken was rescued from a sanctuary or the humane society?

But even if the hens were adopted or rescued, have a clean, protected enclosure and will be able to live out their lives in peace (which is rarely the case), we still should not eat their eggs. Such an improbable situation could only feed very few people in a rural area with access to this backyard or small farm. This operation would not be able to consistently supply the neighborhood, or local restaurants or groceries for that matter. To be profitable, they would have to start purchasing chicks and “getting rid of” the chickens that are not producing efficiently. They would need to start keeping more hens in a smaller space and so it starts, going down the same road that led us to industrial, large-scale farming.

This romanticized notion that we can go back to pastoral days of small, ethical farming is a delusion. Conning, breeding, and farming animals for their flesh and bodily secretions was never humane. As long as we consider eggs food, the probability for exploitation will always be present. “Humane” farming of chickens to feed the billions of people on the planet is impossible.

IDENTIFYING AS VEGAN

It's important that we identify as vegans, abstaining from all meat, dairy and eggs. You may eat only eggs that you think are ethical, but you are then identifying as an egg eater. Let's say that you are at a friend's house and she baked some muffins. She says there are eggs in them, but they are from a "good source." Because you eat eggs, you believe her, and don't think much about it and eat a muffin. But that "good source" could be a cage-free farm where the hens are debeaked, never feel the sun on their feathers or the earth beneath them, and live a short, miserable life.

The better scenario is to say, "Thanks, but I'm vegan" and not eat the muffin. This demonstrates that it is highly suspect that the eggs were from happy hens and we are choosing not to exploit animals for their bodies anymore. You can then bake some delicious vegan muffins for your friend to try next time!

As long as a hen's eggs, or her flesh, are considered food, there is the potential for abuse. Assuming that we can feed the billions people on the planet with "backyard" eggs is a fantasy. As I say in my book *The Ultimate Betrayal*, "It is not our methods of animal agriculture that need to change, it is our unwillingness to give up animal products and animal farming." We must stop this cycle of use and abuse, live a truly cruelty-free, vegan lifestyle, and stop eating eggs.