

Good Food investigates CAGE-FREE EGGS

What is the ethical cost of the eggs that are so integral to your breakfast table? Good Food explores this important issue that has the food world in a flap

Words VIDYA BALACHANDER Photographs courtesy HAPPY HENS FARM

Ever since the poultry revolution of the mid-'80s uplifted the humble egg and crowned it as a cheap yet stellar source of protein, India has harboured a growing affair with eggs. Costing as little as ₹3 per egg and available at every corner shop, they are a convenient and cost-effective way of bringing some balance to our carbohydrate-heavy diets. But are they extorting a far heavier price from the birds that produce them?

A SYSTEM OF SUFFERING

India's demand for eggs has grown exponentially in the last decade. According to the poultry sector review conducted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation in 2008, India was the third largest producer of eggs in the world. Currently, the country produces a whopping 57 billion eggs per annum, a majority of which is consumed domestically.

As a result, egg production has been transformed from a backyard activity for rural farmers to a highly organised urban industry. To maximise production, companies follow an intensive system of breeding hens indoors in factory settings.

Instead of foraging for food, as they would in a free-range setting, commercially bred high-yield hens spend their entire lives cooped up in wire battery cages. Several thousand hens are packed into small cages, which afford them "less living space than an A4 sheet of paper", according to Nugehalli Jayasimha, campaign



An urban free-range farm

manager with Humane Society International, an NGO working in the field of animal rights. The cages are placed in rows, side-by-side and stacked several tiers high.

From birth until they are 18 to 22 months old, female birds lay an average of 250 to 300 eggs a year. At the end of two-and-a-half years, when their tightly monitored egg production begins to drop, the birds are culled and fresh chicks take their place.

Although 60% of the total eggs in the world still come from industrial farms, many countries including Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden, Germany and Australia have banned battery cages. The European Union will phase them out by 2012.

But India has been slow to catch on to the global trend. Even though the rural poultry sector still contributes significantly to the total national egg production, these *desi* eggs don't reach urban consumers because there are few cooperatives of rural egg farmers.

There are only a handful of urban agriculturists in the country who have set up free-range farms. Out of these, only a couple have the marketing muscle to stock their products on the retail shelf, which means that the availability of free-range eggs is spotty at best, even in urban areas.

A BUSINESS OF NUMBERS

In the words of Manjunath Marappan, a NIFT graduate who set up Happy Hens Farm, a free-range farm in Bangalore, in early 2010, "The business of poultry is pure mathematics."

Commercial facilities reap profits by choosing high-yield bird species and supplying them with nutritious feed. Illnesses are swiftly controlled using antibiotics. Each bird is fed between 100-110g of feed every day. Since they don't have any exercise, the birds lay an egg weighing 50-55g every day.

In free-range conditions, the economic equation is skewed by a number of extraneous factors. For one, commercial breeds are unsuited to the challenging conditions of the outdoors, where they are susceptible to infections



and also have to ward off predators. In the outdoor, it is also difficult to precisely monitor how much feed each bird consumes. Egg production is not quite as predictable, with each bird on Marappan's farm laying an egg only once every two days.

Given these variables, free-range farmers are compelled to sell their eggs at a premium. A box of six eggs from Keggs, the best-known cage-free brand of eggs based in Delhi, costs ₹55, or nearly triple the normal price per egg.

THE RESTAURANT CONUNDRUM

The premium they have to pay for cage-free eggs is a major deterrent for hotels and standalone restaurants. The other challenge is finding a regular supplier of cage-free eggs. While Marappan supplies eggs to some establishments in Bangalore, restaurateurs in other parts of the country have to invariably fall back on Keggs, the biggest player in the market.

But Jayasimha argues that some part of the onus lies on big buyers with financial clout and high demand. Multinational companies such as Google and fast-food chains like McDonald's, which follow a cage-free policy in their canteens abroad are not as particular when it comes to their Indian productions, he says.

IN CONCLUSION

The Indian hospitality industry has begun to awaken to the significance of

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE

- Most of the eggs that are available locally are produced by commercial farms that follow the wire battery cage system.
- Cage-free eggs are produced in farms where the birds are contained within a shed or perimeter, but are not kept in cages. They are allowed to forage and have perches on different levels so that they don't have to fight for ground space.
- Free-range eggs are produced by birds that are allowed open access to the outdoors. In a rural setting, birds are allowed to forage in the backyard. In urban free-range farms, the birds may be allowed to roam free within a large compound.

cage-free eggs. While the Four Seasons Hotel in Mumbai and the Manor in Delhi use only cage-free eggs in their restaurants, hotel chains such as the Park and the ITC Sonar in Kolkata have principally agreed to convert to cage-free eggs.

But it's clear that a lot of work remains to be done before cage-free eggs become easily available to all. Currently, there is no scientific evidence to suggest that these eggs are more nutritious than regular able eggs. Hence, choosing cage-free eggs is a difficult call of conscience — and the onus of that call lies equally on producers and consumers.

WHERE TO BUY FREE-RANGE / CAGE-FREE EGGS

Bangalore residents can register for home delivery of free-range eggs from Happy Hens Farm by writing to manjunath6@gmail.com.

Keggs brand eggs are available in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata at Food Bazaar, Reliance Fresh, Spencer's and Nature's Basket outlets.