

JUST DOWN THE ROAD

A GOOD EGG

BY LAUREN DUFFY

As I stood in my kitchen last week whipping a bowl of egg whites for a soufflé, I found myself contemplating the versatility of the liquid assets in front of me. Eggs can be eaten at any meal of the day, are used in hundreds of regional and national cuisines and are a household staple that, aside from condiments, spices and oils, may be the most ubiquitous ingredient in western households. It's perfectly acceptable to ask a neighbor to borrow an egg, and, at least in some households, the very definition of hospitality is cooking up a large breakfast scramble for weekend guests. Eggs are so ingrained in our culture that it's easy to take them for granted.

Yet as familiar as those uniform white ovals are, we shouldn't take them for granted. Behind every egg out there, there's a hard-working laying hen; behind every flock of laying hens, there's a team of hard-working farmers ensuring that they are sheltered, fed and comfortable. Eggs may be simple to whip up and cook, but they only arrive in our fridge when industrious and dedicated egg ranchers decide to make that happen.

In San Diego, we are fortunate to have several egg producers in our own backyard. They range in size from commercial operations producing millions of eggs to small backyard coops housing just a handful of hens. Many of them distribute to area grocery and convenience stores, sell at farmers' markets, or from their own stores or homes, making fresh, local eggs surprisingly easy to come by in San Diego. Here are a few to keep an eye out for:

Hillikers Ranch Fresh Eggs is a second- (going on third-) generation egg farm in Lakeside that has been producing eggs since 1942. They currently produce between 15,000 and 20,000 eggs a day, and offer both brown and white eggs, from laying hens that are fed an all-vegetarian diet. Theirs are some of the most widely distributed local eggs in the county. "We sell to everybody and their brother," Frank Hilliker exaggerates, explaining that they distribute to an area "from the Mexican border to Julian and over to Camp Pendleton." Consumers can find their eggs in all of the local Henry's grocery stores, some Albertsons grocery stores and numerous smaller groceries and convenience stores. They also sell out of their own store on the ranch, which is open six days a week from 8 to



11:30 am and 12:30 to 5 pm. The store is located at 11329 El Nopal, Lakeside; 619 448-3683.

Eben Haezer Egg Ranch was started in 1957 by Eb and Annie Hogervorst, who came to San Diego from the Netherlands in 1955. Their Ramona ranch has been family-run for over 50 years. The ranch has “only 50,000 animals,” according to Annie, which she explains sounds like a lot but is actually rather small for egg ranches. The ranch sells four sizes of Grade AA eggs as well as free-range brown eggs. All of their laying hens are fed a vegetarian diet of corn and soybean meal with added vitamins and minerals. Consumers can find their eggs at the Del Mar, Pacific Beach, Coronado and Horton Square farmers’ markets, and in several restaurants in the area, including A. R. Valentien, Georges California Modern, and Nine-Ten. Annie encourages her customers to read about their ranch at ebenhaezereggs.com.

Armstrong Egg Farms is a third-generation egg farm that has been raising eggs for over six decades. The farm started in 1946 with 1,000 laying hens; now the Valley Center ranch has over one million. They recently added a cage-free facility, and estimate that 10 percent of their eggs come from cage-free hens. All of their eggs are raised on a mixture of corn and soy, which Alan Armstrong explains is “not organic, but it’s a natural feed; it’s good quality.” He emphasizes the care they take in raising their animals, specifically that they do not use hormones, and that “we do everything we can to keep the chickens as comfortable as possible.” Armstrong distributes to all Trader Joe’s locations in Southern California and also sells eggs direct from the family’s egg store in Valley Center. More information is available at armstrongeggfarms.com.

Kimber’s Farm Fresh Eggs is a relatively small egg ranch in San Marcos that has been in operation since 1994. They raise certified organic eggs, from hens that forage on greens from the garden and bugs, and are fed a special feed mixture. They sell eggs from several heritage chicken breeds, as well as duck eggs. They only sell directly from the farm, and are open Monday–Saturday from 10 am to 5 pm and Sunday noon to 5 pm. In addition to eggs and a variety of organic produce, they are one of the few farms in the area selling poultry, including turkeys and chickens. The best way to arrange a purchase is to contact them via phone, to ensure availability and to arrange a time to stop by: 760 744-6705.

Then there’s **Angus Acres Eggs**, one of the county’s smallest—if not *the* smallest—egg operations. Angus Acres doesn’t actually exist on acres at all, but on a single 1/3 of an acre in a suburban backyard in Lemon Grove. The backyard is that of Beverly Franklin-Atkinson, who started raising chickens as pets several years ago, and began selling eggs when her household couldn’t eat all of the eggs the chickens were laying. She’s transformed what she calls “your typical suburban backyard” into a miniature paradise for her seven hens by installing a chicken coop, runs and an orchard where the hens can forage for food. All of her hens are heritage breeds—her favorite are Marans, a French breed that she describes as laying “gorgeous eggs.” She sells from her house but often has a wait list for eggs, and recommends contacting her through her website: www.suburbanchicken.org.

Like local produce, locally produced eggs boast an unrivaled freshness, and a shorter transit time from farm to plate. And, as with produce, freshness relates to quality. As Alan Armstrong would say it: “The fresh-

er the egg, the better the taste.” Armstrong explains that eggs from the Midwest can take two weeks to get from ranch to retail, sometimes up to three weeks in the winter when snow affects travel. Conversely, Armstrong eggs take an average of three days to get from the hen house to supermarket shelves. At farmers’ markets, it’s not uncommon to come across eggs that are no more than a day old. If freshness means quality, with so many local egg producers in San Diego County, there’s no excuse to be eating anything but the best. ☛

Lauren Duffy is a San Diego-based writer and editor who has had a passion for food almost as long as her passion for words. She celebrates the pleasures of both on her website, www.shootingstarsofthought.com.

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