



OPINION | LEILA PHILIP

# Know your chickens — and your eggs



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Organic eggs on the shelves at a Whole Foods Market in Willowbrook, Ill.

By Leila Philip

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MY MOTHER keeps chickens — a mixed flock of tawny Buff Orpingtons, black-and-white-feathered Barred Rocks, Rhode Island Reds, and some rather histrionic long-necked Araucana hens from South America. This past July, I sat on the back porch and watched them dust bathe, which chickens do to clean their feathers.

Each hen, or set of same, had a distinct style. The two Araucanas, as if practicing synchronized swimming, began to gently tap the dust with their wingtips, then arched them

up, sprinkling just the slightest layer of dust on their backs before they flung themselves down with dramatic shudders, necks outstretched. Then they lay still, as if dead.

A sturdy Rhode Island Red scratched vigorously, sweeping dust up with her wings in great clouds before settling down with considerable self-importance, head high, eyes alert. Nearby, a Barred Rock hen puffed herself up to twice her size and sat there like some enormous feather snowball. Watching them was to believe that there might be such a thing as chicken bliss.

I was thinking about my mother's chickens the other day as I stared at the spectacularly confusing spectrum of egg cartons lining the shelves of the dairy aisle. On one end were plain boxes of conventionally raised white and brown eggs, while at the other, more colorful versions featuring pictures of farms and hens and some lovely, misleading stories.

"Blue sky above, green grass below, just livin' the dream," read one box, which featured a photograph of an alert Rhode Island Red, her head peeking up from green grass. I admit, I almost chose that one. Then I started reading the various labels: "Cage Free," "vegetarian fed," "organic," "humanely raised," "pasture raised," "free range," "omega-3," "farm raised," "hormone free," and so on, ad almost infinitum.

Which was better, "organic" or "free range?" What did "farm fresh" even mean? Assuming that higher price meant better quality, in the end I chose one of the most expensive brands. The egg carton I went for stated that hens on its farms ranked 4, the top score of the "hen happiness scale." Okay, I knew I was being snookered, but thinking of my mother's chickens, how could I resist?

Massachusetts recently passed ballot Question 3, outlawing the horrific conditions of battery cages for hens, which means that by 2020 all eggs on the shelves of grocery stores will be technically from hens living "cage free"— a small but important step toward better animal welfare practices. But the language of this new regulation is vague — it states that hens must be able to do things like stand up, lie down, and spread their wings, but does not establish a minimum space requirement, meaning that the interpretation of these standards will vary.

Most important, egg cartons will remain full of misleading labeling. To buy eggs from farms that ensure standards of animal welfare (and to choose the most nutritious, albeit more expensive eggs), consumers need to ignore the cute farm stories and look for one label only, the green stamp that reads “certified humane raised and handled.” This certification is regulated by a third-party organization, Humane Farm Animal Care, founded in 2013, and its standards for egg production are backed by yearly inspections of both farms and egg-shipping facilities.

The “certified humane” label has three tiers : “barn raised,” “free range,” and “pasture raised.” Each of these levels assures that hens are not fed animal by-products or given growth hormones and defines minimum space (and perch) requirements. “Barn raised” hens must have 1.5 square feet of space per hen (and no less than 6 inches of perch area), while “free range” hens must have an additional 2 square feet per bird of uncovered outdoor area.

The gold standard of “pasture raised” ensures that hens have access to a pasture area (no less than 2.5 acres per 1,000 birds) that consists mainly of living vegetation and is rotated regularly. Under these conditions, hens revert to their natural omnivore diet of insects, worms, and grass in addition to chicken feed. Raising hens this way requires more space and more labor, so not surprisingly, the eggs are more expensive. They are also more nutritious. Two studies in 2007 conducted by the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Foundation (a branch of the USDA) and Mother Earth News, showed that pasture-raised eggs had one-third less cholesterol than conventionally raised eggs and contained considerably more vitamin A, vitamin E, and omega-3 fatty acids.

So if you are concerned about the treatment of the hens that produced the eggs in your carton, look for the “certified humane” label. Whatever brand and level you choose from, you can know that the hens on those farms have adequate space, perches to fly up and down from, and yes, sand for those moments of chicken bliss, dust bathing.

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