

## **ROMANCE OF THE CHICKEN, LOVE OF THE EGG**

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In December The Food Co-op sold almost 28,000 eggs (more than 2,300 dozen!) with bulk eggs the bulk (no pun intended) of those sales. More than 250 dozen locally produced eggs moved very quickly, often on the same day, from the back door into your shopping basket. Folks love eggs, especially when they're local. In our community we have not nearly arrived at the place where we can produce locally all the eggs we can eat. Local egg producers who sell here at the store or at the farmers market or from the farm almost always find supply lagging behind demand, especially in the winter, when the hens are naturally laying fewer eggs than they do during the day-long summer.

In an eggshell...people love eggs because it's a nearly perfect food, and not just nutritionally. Folks who abstain from meat and dairy for ethical reasons will often make an exception for locally raised eggs from humanely husbanded hens. Folks committed to eating local find that eggs are a good local source of protein and an important addition to the veggies and fruits they can get from local farmers or their own backyard. Because keeping chickens is a kind of "gateway livestock" for the small-scale farmer, you're likely to find plenty of local suppliers, from your next door neighbor to one of our area farms.

### **Local Eggs and Local Egg Farmers**

As the days lengthen egg production increases. In late summer the young pullets that were chicks in the early spring will start laying eggs (the most nutritious eggs come from these hens that are less than a year old). With fall and winter the days get shorter and egg production, especially for older hens, will fall off or drop off altogether. There is a very real connection to season when you eat local eggs—you will notice it if you get your eggs from a backyard farmer who doesn't bring artificial light into the henhouse. You will eat fewer eggs.

In winter, local egg producers have fewer eggs to bring to market as they adjust for lower production. When production drops feed costs go up, so egg prices might increase. They are also feeling the effects of the global market, with recent sharp increases in the price of the feed that forms the basis of most laying hens' diets. You can be sure, though, that these folks aren't rolling in dough from the sale of eggs. Much of it is work of the heart, a desire to bring high quality food to their friends and neighbors and a commitment to responsible stewardship.

Our most reliable source of local eggs is Solstice Farm in Chimacum. Solstice Farm is a diverse farm on 34 acres raising chickens, ducks and other livestock with a llama guard animal that does the work of protecting their farm animals. Farmer Linda Davis explains that her and husband Jim Reuff's husbandry practice is to "fence the chickens out rather than fence them in" to keep them out of orchards and gardens. Otherwise, these truly free-ranging chickens have the run of the farm's pastures and are only closed in at night.

Solstice Farm currently has about 100 chickens and 100 ducks, mixed-breed flocks with new alternating breeds introduced each year to mark their age. This year they have Light Brahmas. Previous years they've had Buff Orpingtons, New Hampshire Reds, and Rhode Island Reds. Good management of the flock requires that older birds be culled from the flock and alternating breeds helps Linda identify the birds' age. Duck breeds include White Pekins and Khaki Campbells.

Eggs from Solstice Farm arrive in our store almost every week throughout the year. Chicken eggs go fast; duck eggs go almost in the blink of an eye. You have to be here at the right time to get a dozen of these larger-sized rich duck eggs. Linda explained that most people can't taste the difference between a chicken

egg and a duck egg (some folks say they're more rich tasting) and she told me something I didn't know—some people who are allergic to chicken eggs can eat duck eggs without experiencing any reactions.

A “message of the week,” crafted by Jim and tucked into each egg box, keeps customers connected to the farm. These messages also work in serendipitous ways. “We tell people what we need and we get it,” Linda explains. “Recently we asked folks for the sleeves from their old wool sweaters so that I could use the yarn to make coats for the new lambs.” Friends of the farm were thrilled when they visited to see the threads from their old sweaters swaddling the farm's newborns.

Other local sources of chicken and duck eggs include Dharma Ridge Farm, Serendipity Farm, Wildwood Farm, Ananda Hills Farm, Plum Wild Farm, and Pheasant Field Farms. Pheasant Fields Farms in Silverdale, a family-run working farm in operation for 50 years, supplies our store with eggs for about half the year. The other producers mentioned sell their eggs either at the Farmers Market from May to November or directly from the farm.

Farmer Jenny Watkins at Ananda Hills keeps a large flock of laying hens that she replenishes regularly with new chicks. Her flock is made up primarily of Rhode Island Reds, Astralorps, Cuckoo Marans and Americanas that are ranged on about 4 acres of electro-fenced pasture that's shared with Jenny's flock of Shetland sheep and guard dog Scout. The chickens' grass and bug diet is supplemented with a commercial organic feed that comes from In Seasons Farm in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Karen and Andy Driscoll at Plum Wild Farm sell eggs direct from their farm. A mixed flock of about 75 hens (green egg layers Americanas, “chocolate egg” layers Cuckoo Marans, Wyandotts, Dominiques, and Barred Rocks) supply the eggs, with a Cochin rooster to keep things interesting. There's also a flock of banties for fun and for “U-Pick Chicken Eggs” for the kids. Plum Wild Farm's chickens are fed organic feed and range on about 5 acres of pasture. Like Solstice Farm, Plum Wild produces its own monthly publication, a newsletter, Karen explains, produced entirely by the chickens reporting on important topics like chicken politics and union news.

### **New Strategies for Feeding the Local Flock**

I asked some of our local egg producers about strategies they're thinking about experimenting with as feed prices skyrocket (many local farmers have been struggling with a jump in feed costs of \$2 or more for a 44 kg bag). Solstice Farm is thinking about raising sunflowers and would like to raise corn, which could be used for food and bedding, if ways could be devised to store a small crop. For the time being, Linda at Solstice says, “If there's something we can raise and grow easily, we do it...collards and kales...today we gave them some of the pumpkin we grew this year.”

Theodore Carlat, most recently at Ananda Hills Farm, is attempting to mobilize local farmers to begin growing at least a portion of feed grain for local farms and backyard farmers like myself. Perhaps drawing on the idea of the farmer cooperative or a CSA, Theodore has investigated the willingness of folks raising poultry in our area to pay up front for local farmers to grow the grain that he projects can eventually fill a portion of our feed requirements. Even if local farmers produce enough oats and barley to provide scratch grains to laying hens, it would be a step in the right direction.

Any way you look at it, farmers in our region learning how to supply some of their animal feed will help extricate us all from the larger implications of feed, organic or not, that's transported long distances. In the same way that our government is advocating energy independence, we can advocate for true food independence when we look at innovative (or old-fashioned) strategies for feeding the animals that provide the meat, milk, and eggs we like to eat.