

Egg to differ

Confused by the labels on egg cartons? Our buyer's guide unscrambles your options

By Sue Radd

CAGE EGGS

Cage eggs suffer bad press for a reason: the birds that lay them are confined to indoor battery cages in a space that's about the size of an A4 piece of paper. They can't flap their wings, perch, dust bathe, forage or lay eggs in a sheltered nest. They're fed pellets made from grains, proteins and vegetable oil or animal fat.

Score: Zero. I consider this a cruel and unnecessary way of producing eggs, despite the cheap cost.

BARN-LAID EGGS

This claim means that hens remain exclusively inside sheds. They're free to roam, but capacity is limited: each hen shares every square metre with up to 14 other birds. Unlike cage-egg chooks, these hens are given perches, litter and nest boxes, but they receive the same feed as caged hens.

Score: ● This scenario is a step up from cage-egg production, but it doesn't allow hens to go outdoors and express the full range of natural behaviours.

FREE-RANGE EGGS

As with barn-laid eggs, the hens of free- or open-range methods reside in sheds but have outdoor access during the day. Still, this doesn't mean they stay outside; their food and water are indoors. In the barn, capacity is comparable to that of barn-laid eggs. These birds move around more than their caged or barn-housed cousins, so their feed includes extra protein.

Score: ●● My pick for an economical egg. The chooks get to go outside—which *must* be important, seeing as they rush out as soon as the shed opens!

RSPCA-APPROVED EGGS

These are either barn-laid or free-range eggs from hens that live in accordance with the RSPCA's animal-welfare standards. For example, sheds can house a maximum of seven birds per square metre, so the chooks have more room to behave naturally.

Score: ●● These birds receive greater respect than hens of most other production methods.

ORGANIC EGGS

These premium-priced eggs come from hens that eat organic feed and live in free-range conditions. They're kept in a strictly chemical-, antibiotic- and toxin-free environment. An organic-egg farm's capacity is about five birds per square metre.

Score: ●●● These eggs are a top choice. At about 75 cents an egg, they're more expensive than other

varieties but still cheaper than many other sources of protein.

OMEGA-3-ENRICHED EGGS

To produce eggs that are high in omega-3 fats, the hens' feed is enriched with linseed or fish oil. But note: these eggs *aren't* organic.

Score: ● This type of egg may be beneficial if you don't eat fish and are trying to boost your omega-3 intake, but unless labelled otherwise, they can still be cage-produced or barn-laid.

VEGETARIAN EGGS

This claim means that the animal proteins in the feed are replaced with soy. Again, they're *not* organic.

Score: ● Although the feed contains no animal by-products, it may surprise vegetarians to learn that, unless the carton states otherwise, these eggs *aren't* free-range. **P**



Which eggs should you avoid?



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