

# Chicago Tribune

## 'Cage-free' eggs take flight

### Some shoppers like that birds can roam

By Marni Goldberg  
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June 11, 2006

WASHINGTON -- When Peggy Taylor goes grocery shopping, she can't always find what she wants at the store around the corner. So the 62-year-old Washington resident frequents Whole Foods Market, one place she knows she'll find "cage-free" eggs.

Taylor makes a habit of purchasing eggs produced by hens that are not confined to cages but can roam freely inside barns or warehouses.

"There's been more publicity about how stock animals are handled," she said. "It hasn't made me a vegetarian yet, but it might."

The concerns of shoppers like Taylor are part of a growing public interest in where food comes from-- whether beef cows were fed on grass, whether asparagus came from local farmers, how much geese suffer in the production of foie gras.

When it comes to eggs, animal-welfare activists are pressuring grocery chains to stop selling ones from caged hens. In the confining rows of cages that house most poultry, they say, the birds cannot engage in such natural behaviors as nesting, perching, dust bathing or even spreading their wings.

"When you cram so many birds into a cage that they are unable to spread their wings, it's an economic and moral shortcut," said Paul Shapiro, who heads the Factory Farming Campaign of the Humane Society of the United States.

#### Caged vs. cage-free

Egg producers respond that keeping chickens in cages is much cheaper for consumers; conventional eggs typically cost about a third as much as cage-free ones and are equally nutritious, they say. Producers also argue that caging is safer, keeping birds more disease-free.

In any case, a Humane Society campaign to encourage cage-free policies appears to be having some success. In 2005, Whole Foods Market, Wild Oats Natural Marketplace, Earth Fare and Jimbo's Naturally agreed to sell only cage-free eggs, which now account for an estimated 2 to 5 percent of the market. In May, Ohio State University became one of about 90 schools promising to reduce their use of caged-bird eggs in dining facilities.

Sonja Tuitele, spokeswoman for Wild Oats, said the corporation always has preferred to sell cage-free eggs and about 90 percent of its stock always had been of that variety. Last year the natural- and organic-foods retailer formalized its cage-free policy with the encouragement of the Humane Society.

Trader Joe's, meanwhile, has agreed that all its brand-name eggs would come only from cage-free birds, though the store still sells conventional eggs. Cage-free eggs are sold alongside conventional eggs in many groceries, including Wal-Mart, Dominick's and Jewel.

The precise number of cage-free eggs sold each week is hard to pin down. But with more consumption of such eggs, some of the nation's producers have adjusted. Among those is Radlo Foods, a Massachusetts-based corporation that has converted 15 percent of its production to cage-free facilities.

"Our job is to satisfy our customers," said David Radlo, chief executive of the company. "Our customers are the ones that are changing and they are the ones who are causing us to adapt to their behavior."

Increasing the production of cage-free eggs is a capital commitment, he said. "Instead of having 80,000 to 110,000 birds [in a facility] you are looking at really 18,000 to 20,000 if you are doing it cage-free."

Radlo said his caged and cage-free hens are fed the same, given the same vaccinations and tested for the same diseases. With that equal treatment, there is no nutritional difference between the two types of eggs, he said.

Others agreed.

"Under conditions of the same breed of bird fed the same feed, one in a traditional production facility and one cage-free are going to have identical nutritional

value," said Donald McNamara, executive director of the Egg Nutrition Center in Washington, an industry-funded group.

### Health risk weighed

McNamara said there are benefits to caged egg production and that a move to more controlled environments for hens took place 50 to 60 years ago.

"People aren't going in and out, rodents aren't going in and out, wild birds aren't going in and out," he said. "Those birds aren't going to be in contact with wild animals. That bio-security gives you a much lower incidence of diseases that the bird can contract."

In some Northern European countries where there is much more cage-free and free-range egg production, birds now have been placed back inside cages or houses to protect against avian influenza, McNamara said.

Others in the egg industry point to one obvious benefit to caged production: cost. According to recent reports by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average price of a conventional Grade A extra-large dozen was 89 cents, while a dozen extra-large cage-free brown eggs averaged \$2.50.

The cost does not deter some shoppers. "It's something worth paying for," Taylor said.

While no laws or regulations govern treatment of hens, United Egg Producers--a trade association representing 95 percent of egg producers in the U.S.--adopted guidelines a few years ago. Independent authorities, including the USDA, audit the program, and producers who do not meet its standards cannot carry the UEP Certified seal.

The guidelines helped move the industry toward permitting hens at least 67 square inches of space in cages, an increase from the 49 square inches that was standard four years ago.

But the Humane Society's Shapiro argued that the guidelines, while an improvement, are still woefully insufficient.

The United Egg Producers does not express a preference for caged or cage-free eggs. But spokesman Mitch Head said the Humane Society's campaign amounts to an assault on egg consumption.

"The Humane Society is going on their emotions and political agenda," Head said. "They are really opposed to people eating animal agricultural products."

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### Cracking the labeling code

**CONVENTIONAL:** Birds are raised in cages. About 80 percent of the egg industry complies with the United Egg Producers Certified program, which has established guidelines to address living conditions, health care and treatment. Average price per dozen, USDA Grade A extra large, 89 cents.

**CAGE FREE:** Hens are uncaged inside warehouses or barns but do not necessarily have access to the outdoors. Average price of extra large brown eggs per dozen, \$2.50.

**FREE RANGE:** Hens are raised outdoors or are uncaged inside barns or warehouses but have access to the outdoors. No price listed by USDA.

**ORGANIC EGGS:** Produced by hens whose feed does not contain most conventional pesticides, herbicides or commercial fertilizers. The use of growth hormones is not allowed. According to the the Humane Society, birds are uncaged in barns and warehouses and are permitted outside. Average price of USDA brown extra large per dozen, \$4.

**FERTILE EGGS:** These eggs come from hens that were living with roosters. According to the Humane Society of the United States, that means they were not likely caged. No price listed.

**OMEGA-3:** Flax, marine algae or fish oils are included in the hen's feed, thereby increasing the omega-3 fatty acid contained in the egg. Average price per extra large dozen, \$2.43.

**SOURCES:** Humane Society of the United States, Egg Nutrition Center. Prices reflect most recent available from the USDA.

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