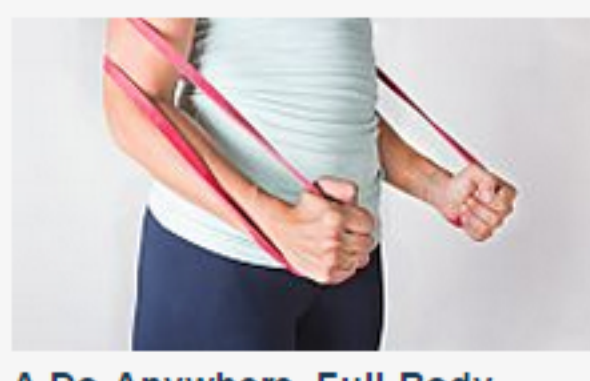


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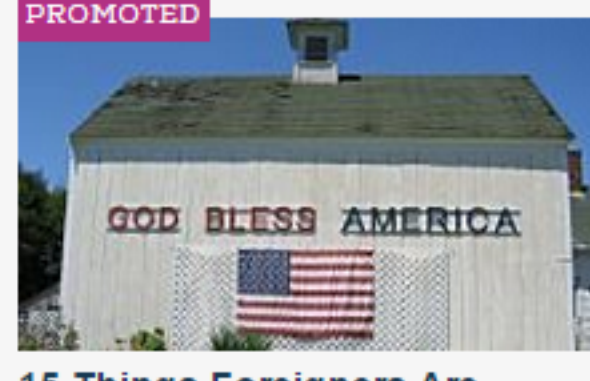
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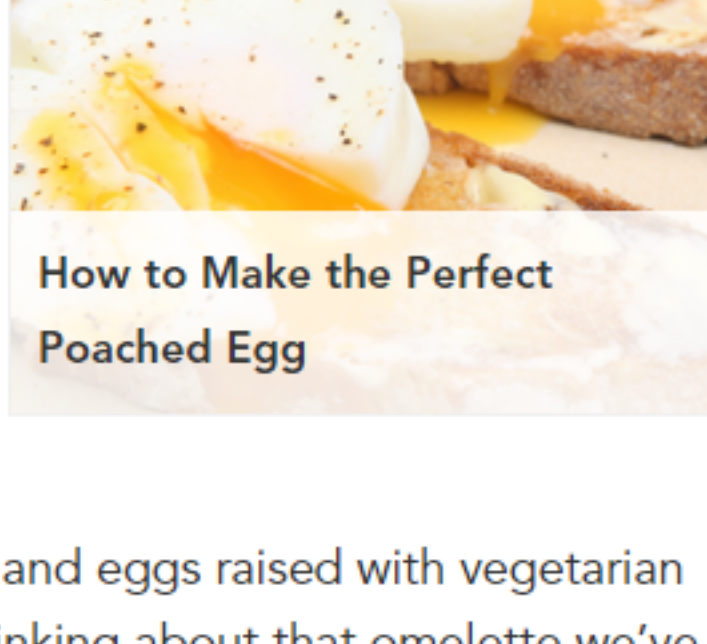
JULY 2, 2015 | BY BRITTANY TAYLOR

Everything You Need to Know Before You Buy Your Next Dozen Eggs

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We love our eggs every which way: [poached](#), [hard-boiled](#), even [baked in an avocado](#). But picking out a carton at the grocery store has become more confusing in recent years. It's no longer just a decision between white or brown and large or extra large. Now we can choose among pasture-raised or cage-free, and eggs raised with vegetarian or organic feed—and rather than thinking about that omelette we've been craving, our mind starts contemplating animal welfare.



How to Make the Perfect Poached Egg

Before you throw up your hands in despair and make a beeline for the [cereal](#) aisle, we decoded the confusing labels and found out if happy hens really lay more nutritious eggs, so you select the best dozen for your next egg-stravaganza. (We couldn't help ourselves!)

Become a Label Sleuth



Egg cartons are covered with buzzwords like “antibiotic free” and “free roaming hens,” but the [USDA regulates only](#) a handful of these terms. Here are the differentiating aspects for six they do define:

- **Cage-free:** Chickens can wander freely in an enclosed space.
- **Free-range:** Hens are given shelter and some access to the outdoors.
- **Pasture-raised:** Chickens are given shelter and have access to the outdoors for a substantial part of their lives.
- **Organic:** Eggs come from free-range chickens that were not given antibiotics or growth hormones. (It's worth noting that it's illegal to give chickens growth hormones and [rare to give laying hens antibiotics](#).)
- **Natural:** Eggs are minimally processed and free of artificial ingredients.
- **Grass-fed:** Hens are fed grass and other food typically found in the pasture, except grains.

The trouble with these definitions is they are purposely vague. They don't define, for example, how much time free-range chickens get to spend outdoors versus their pasture-raised counterparts. To better understand where your eggs come from, you should go directly to the source, says Aurora Porter, the national sales manager at Vital Farms. All egg cartons have the name and address of the farm where they were produced. Some, like Vital Farms, even list a number to call if you have questions about how the hens are raised and treated.

Don't Worry About Color or Carton Type

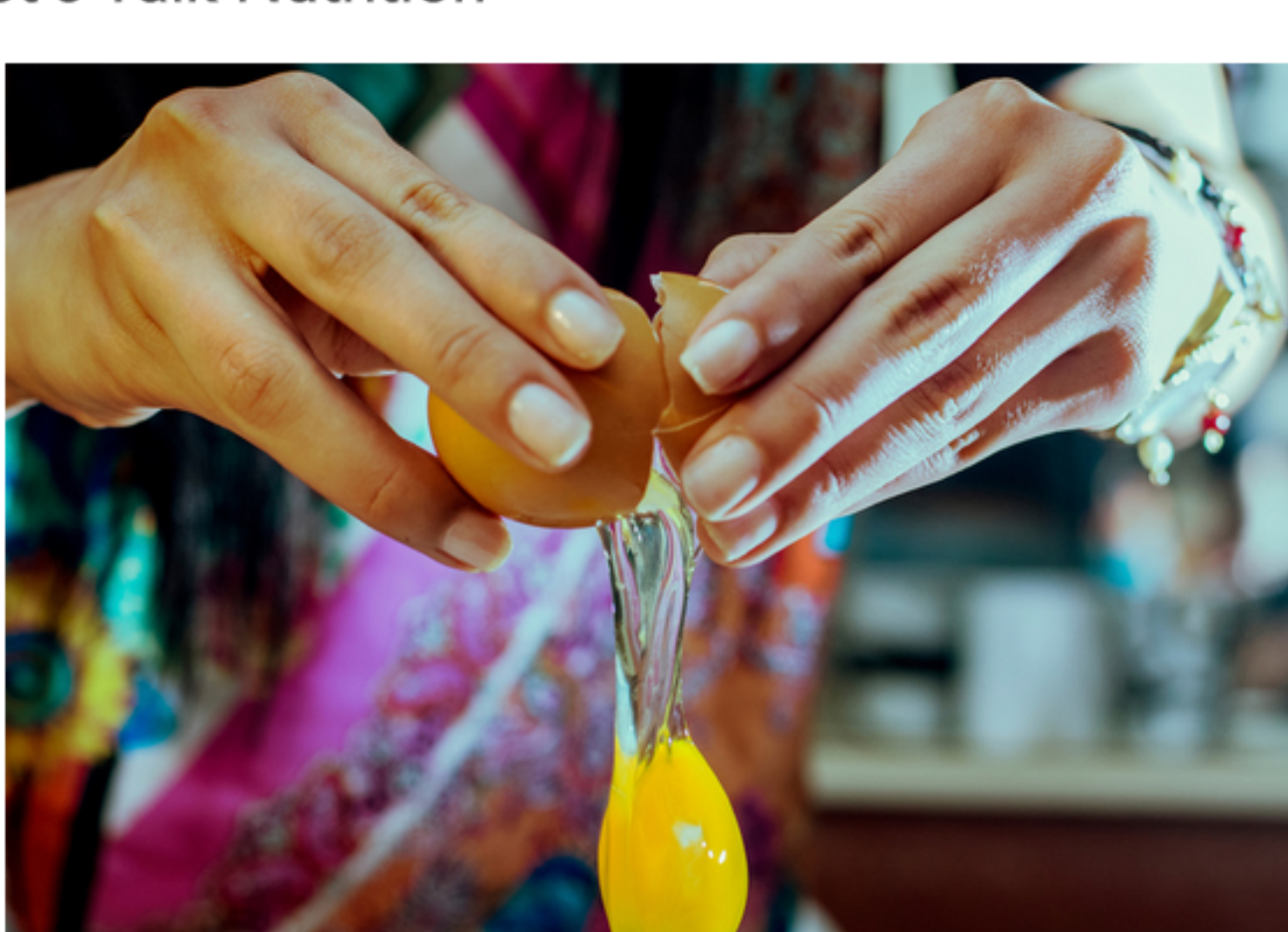
Unlike the rice, the color of an egg has nothing to do with its nutritional value or flavor—a hen's breed determines whether its eggs will be white, brown, or really any color of the rainbow. “The color of an egg is a lot like hair color,” says Jennifer Trainer Thompson, author of *The Fresh Egg Cookbook*. “It doesn't matter if that chicken is a redhead or a brunette, the taste of the egg is going to be the same.”

So why do we see so many white eggs at the grocery store? “Long ago factory farmers figured out the best breed for laying eggs in a confined cage,” Porter explains. “And that breed happened to lay white eggs.”

While many of us have strong reactions to the color of the eggs we purchase, we probably don't think twice about the container they're being carried in—so long as they don't get cracked in transit, we're good. And that's probably the right attitude to have. Most commercial egg producers use foam, cardboard, or plastic containers, and each [has its advantages](#): Foam is cheap to produce and is best at keeping eggs cool; cardboard is typically made from recycled materials; and plastic is a great cushion to stop eggs from cracking.

If you're looking at it from an environmental perspective, all three types of cartons can be recycled. Just double-check with your local recycling program to see the types of materials they accept before you buy your next dozen.

Let's Talk Nutrition



It's hard to describe how good a fresh egg plucked right from the hen house in your backyard tastes, Thompson says. “It's like trying to compare fresh lettuce with the iceberg you buy at the store,” she says. “It's a totally different experience, but both are still green and crunchy.”

Few of us have access to backyard chickens, so we'll have to settle for eggs at the grocery store that were laid a few weeks prior. And while anecdotally the pricier pasture-raised eggs have a fuller, richer flavor, there is little science to prove they are nutritionally better. Many pasture-raised farmers cite a [2007 study](#) that found lower cholesterol and saturated fat levels as well as higher concentrations of vitamins and minerals in eggs laid by free-range flocks compared with traditional hens, but a two-year 2010 study found little difference between the two types of eggs, except that the free-range variety had higher fat content. ■

The Bottom Line

Most of the time, buying something organic—or in this case, pasture-raised—comes with a surcharge. And it makes sense that pasture-raised eggs would be pricier because it takes better feed and more space on pesticide-free, rotated acres to create fewer eggs. The end result is a delicious and drool-worthy egg, but the jury is still out on whether it's more nutritious for you. At the end of the day—or the beginning of breakfast—it's all about determining what you value the most before you scramble on.

➤ **READ THIS NEXT:** [How to Make the Perfect Boiled Egg, Every Time, Every Way](#)



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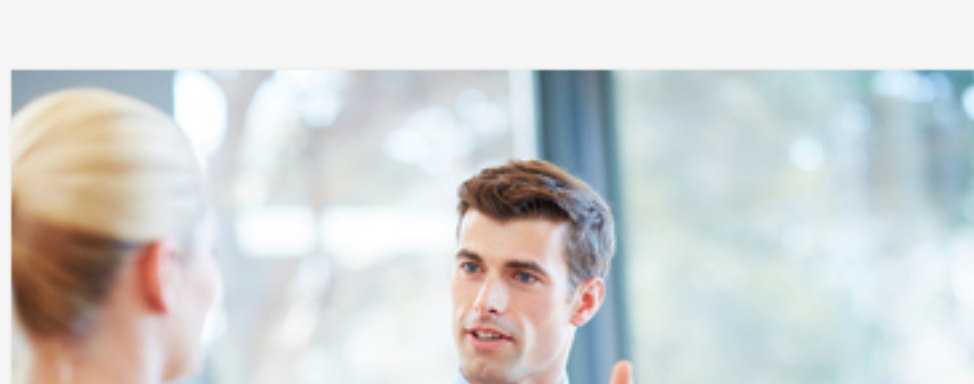
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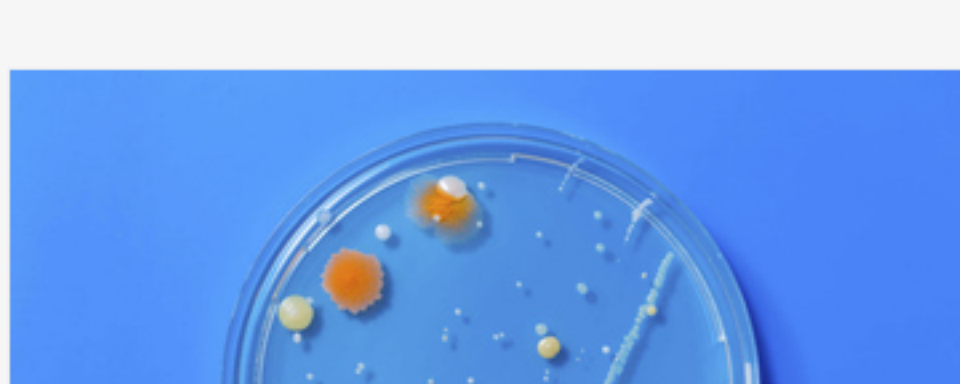
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