

# CULTIVATOR

Spring 2023

News from The Cornucopia Institute

cornucopia.org

## Introducing Our Egg Issue

The only easy thing about eggs is cooking them. Store shelves — when they aren't altogether empty — are full of confusing egg labels.

Cornucopia is here to help you make sense of the market.

Conventional egg production is the epitome of “factory farming.” Non-organic eggs are laid by hens who are denied the ability to forage, spread their wings, or demonstrate other natural behaviors. But organic egg production maintains a higher standard of animal welfare and prohibits the use of cages, hormones, and grain produced with toxic chemicals.

For consumers looking to steer clear of a production system with grave consequences for animals and the environment, organic is the clear choice.

Under the organic label, the market is divided between authentic organic egg producers and industrial operators. Some large producers have entered organic with little regard for the regulations. In the worst scenarios, hundreds of thousands of birds live in one barn, where “outdoor access” amounts to screened-in, concrete porches. These industrial operations often rely on cheap, “organic” grain from overseas, much of which is fraudulent. Often these players squeeze high-quality organic egg producers out of the marketplace.

Cornucopia is watching regulatory progress with cautious optimism. If finalized, the Organic Livestock



*Photo courtesy of Happy Hens in Ramona, Calif. See our spotlight on page 3.*

and Poultry Standards (OLPS) Rule would add detailed requirements for avian species, improving organic egg production. The Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) Rule may also improve the ability to track and stop the use of fraudulent grain products.

These rules should protect the interests of authentic organic livestock producers, while also providing openings for more ethical organic producers to enter the marketplace. As consumers dedicated to organic integrity, we urge you to support Cornucopia's top-rated brands when you can.

We think they are worth it. The cost of producing an authentic organic

egg includes investments in animal welfare, the soil, and organic grain.

Read on for more insight into the organic egg marketplace, a story about an exceptional California farmer with happy hens, a primer on labels (greenwashing is on the rise), and an infographic explaining the criteria used in our refreshed Organic Egg Scorecard, which rates all the organic egg brands available at retail.

You deserve to be informed about the eggs you crack open in your kitchen. The recipe is up to you, but we'll continue to advocate for the vital ingredients: authenticity, transparency, and consumer choice.



# You Have Power

## A letter from Cornucopia's executive director

Dear Cornucopia supporters,

With an 11-year tenure at Cornucopia, I have a painfully clear view of the inner workings of the food system.

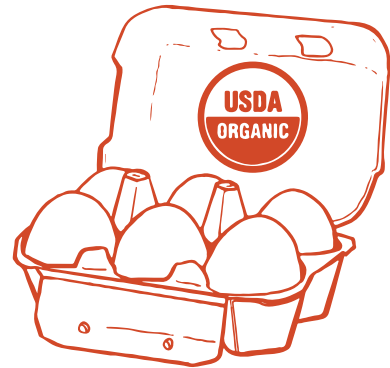
*You deserve to know what you're paying for.* If you buy eggs, or are concerned about animal welfare, the choices can be particularly confusing.

The organic label, once prized as the gold standard in US food production, has been infiltrated by large corporations. Industrial organic egg operators show you idyllic images of a few dozen hens frolicking outside, while tens of thousands of birds remain inside.

Marketing departments plaster the carton with feel-good claims. "Free range" and "pastured" say little about whether birds actually go outside. But along with greenwashing and humanewashing, we found many authentic organic farmers who carry additional labels to let you know when their practices go above and beyond the organic regulations. See our guide to egg labels on page 6.

USDA data shows that the number of organic egg operations is dropping, yet the number of birds is rising. Big operations are getting even bigger and consolidation is driving the best farmers out of organic.

A new rule, Organic Livestock and Poultry Standards, should improve things for authentic organic producers and for birds



in the most crowded organic barns. They will get more space to spread their wings, and screened porches will no longer suffice as their only access to the outdoors. Massive industrial organic egg businesses will have to update their operations or get out of the organic marketplace altogether.

Our investigations continue, and you have a role to play too. Cornucopia's newly updated Organic Egg Scorecard is your guide to turning our analysis into action. Egg brands with the highest scores actively encourage their birds to go outside. While you may not find these superior brands (if you do, they're probably available at your local co-op or independent retailer), you'll likely see at least one 4-egg national brand in the store.

We suggest you buy the highest rated organic brand you can afford. (Any organic brand far exceeds the standards met by conventional egg production, one of the most exploitative and harmful systems of livestock production in the US.) Organic egg prices have been driven up by the high cost of feed. USDA enforcement over the last few years slowed imports of cheap, fraudulent, organic grain. The war in Ukraine has further upended corn and soy markets.

The complexity of the food system makes it easy to forget that you have power. We exist to give some of it back.

A Cornucopia supporter recently wrote, "Like a free press is necessary, so is Cornucopia." We hope you finish this issue with more confidence in your choices and a newfound appreciation for the authentic egg producers who invest so much to get these products to the shelf.

For the health of people and planet,

Melody Morrell  
Executive Director

**P.S. Reach out if you have a fraud tip or find a certified organic egg brand we have not scored.**



# Head of the Flock

Happy Hens lives up to its name

**Anne Ross, JD**

Chloe Nevarez emerges from Happy Hens farm store with an 18-month-old strapped to her back and a toddler by her side. They are ready to show me their egg farm located in Ramona, California.

About nine years ago, Chloe became interested in producing eggs on her family's land just over an hour away from Happy Hens.

She sought the guidance of Happy Hens' owner, Luie, who was managing a flock on pasture. After some convincing, he assigned her odd jobs and demonstrated how he rotated his chickens so they didn't destroy the land. The mentorship led to a marriage. Today, Chloe and Luie co-manage Happy Hens, guided by the motto "truly outdoors."

Chicks arrive when they are one day old, beaks intact. The operation's birds are well adjusted and don't require beak trimming, a practice used by some farmers to prevent aggression — even though most aggression, and the resulting injuries, are caused by a stressful living environment.

Around 12-16 weeks old, the birds leave the barns for pasture. At this age, they are big enough to be less vulnerable to predators. Coyotes, owls, and hawks are a frequent threat to the flock. The birds' greatest protectors are the farm's livestock guardian dogs. Milo, the donkey, also steps in when coyotes approach — stomping, kicking, and carrying on. The roosters in the flock stand watch and warn of aerial predators.

The birds are rotated every one to two days, depending on how much vegetation is left. They get a lift on one of 20 mobile barns built by the Nevarezes to give the flock access to pastures filled with barley, clover, and plenty of bugs.

The operation's birds thrive in this enriched environment.

"You can see it in the way they look and observe differences in their psyche. It's remarkable — outdoors is better," Chloe says.

Behind the idyllic setting is a lot of hard work and resilience in the face of unpredictability, especially when it comes to the weather. The lush green pastures where the birds roam are not taken for granted, nor was the recent

deluge. Irrigating the pastures may be necessary in the future.

Not every customer will know the level of attention and detail that goes into the 9,000 certified organic eggs that are packaged by hand daily and delivered to retail locations throughout southern California up to the central coast. That's why the Nevarezes value Cornucopia's Organic Egg Scorecard and the vital consumer information it delivers about the varying practices within organic.

Happy Hens earns its position at the top of our scorecard. For anyone lucky enough to visit, its namesake birds are proof of a product worth every penny.



Photo courtesy of Happy Hens

*Happy Hens moves its mobile barns with tractors, giving birds continuous access to fresh pasture.*



Illustrations by Kestrel Burcham

### Quality Outdoor Access

Early access to ample outdoor space with plentiful vegetation, shade, exercise areas, fresh air, and direct sunlight ensures the highest animal welfare.

### Commitment to the Organic Label

Brands that only produce organic products make the biggest investments — in time and money — in systems that benefit us all.

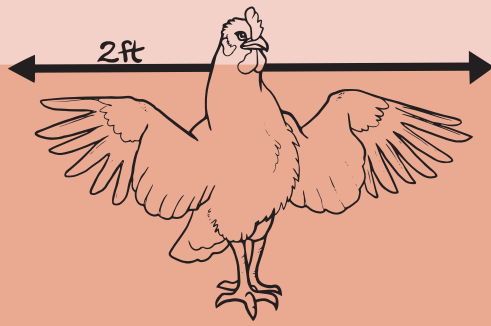


### Spacing

Adequate indoor and outdoor spacing reduces stress and disease. With less crowding, birds can stretch their wings and more easily perform other natural behaviors.

### Transparency

Cornucopia believes you have a right to transparency. Top brands share information with Cornucopia via a survey and cooperate with our own independent investigations.



### Flock Size

Smaller flock sizes (the number of laying hens per housing structure) offer better animal welfare conditions.

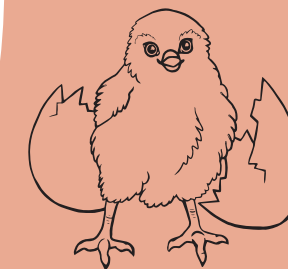


# Cracking Open Our Organic Egg Scorecard

What it takes to reach the top

### Feed Sourcing

Ideally, organic feed is produced either on farm or from a regional or domestic organic grower.



### Chicks

Raising chicks on farm or buying them from certified organic hatcheries shows dedication to organic production from start to finish.

### Alterations

Chickens use their beaks to interact with the world. Authentic organic farmers account for this behavior, eschewing beak trimming.

### Add on Labels

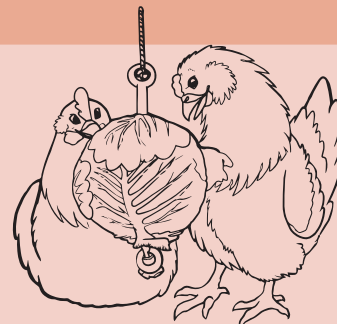
Additional certifications, depending on the credibility of the label, can demonstrate a commitment beyond the organic standards (see next page).

### Hen Housing Type

The best housing offers space for natural behaviors and legitimate access to the outdoors through adequate exits.

### Enrichments

Year-round access to perches, scratching areas, deep litter, novel foodstuffs (like cabbage!), and dust bathing contribute to quality of life.



### Environmental Impacts

Consistent soil and water monitoring and farming practices that support biodiversity and ecosystem benefits are hallmarks of ecologically based egg operations.

When you can, support brands with a 4 (excellent) or 5 (top rated) on our Organic Egg Scorecard: [www.cornucopia.org/scorecard/eggs](http://www.cornucopia.org/scorecard/eggs)



# What Do the Labels on Organic Egg Cartons Really Mean?



**USDA Organic** is the only label with federal production standards. Producers must be inspected by an accredited certifier. GMOs and harmful pesticides are prohibited, and hens' feed must be grown without synthetic fertilizer. Organic hens are never caged. Outdoor access is required, but legitimate access is not guaranteed. While beak trimming is allowed, authentic organic farmers don't rely on it. (Learn why in our Farmer Spotlight on page 3.)



**Regenerative Organic Certified** requires USDA organic certification. ROC producers must be audited by National Organic Program accredited certifiers. They must also carry a Regenerative Organic Alliance approved animal welfare label. Beyond the federal standards, they must meet robust requirements for animal welfare, environmental protection, and farmworker rights.



**Real Organic Project** requires USDA organic certification. Producers must be certified through an on-farm inspection and are held to higher animal welfare standards than USDA organic. The label stipulates indoor spacing and requires access to pasture with vegetation. Stationary housing can be used under this label, but only if all birds are able to use the outdoor space.



**Animal Welfare Approved** maintains high animal welfare standards in the egg industry. Standards promote the natural and instinctive behaviors of laying hens, and producers are inspected annually by qualifying auditors. All birds raised under this label must have legitimate outdoor access. Land used by the birds is closely monitored for environmental impact, and soil testing is required.



**Certified Humane** guarantees a particular amount of indoor space for hens. However, brands can get this label without even letting their birds outside. If the hens have outdoor access, additional requirements above and beyond the USDA organic label apply. Consult our scorecards for information on each brand's practices. Some of the best and worst brands on our scorecard carry this label.



**Animal Welfare Certified** is a label you probably won't see on eggs from your local organic producer. Primarily found on Whole Foods private labels, they use a tiered rating system. Look closely: Only the highest tiers (referred to as Step 4 or Step 5) offer high-quality outdoor access, while the majority of organic eggs are coming from lower tiers that do not require outdoor access.



**American Humane Certified** maintains its own "cage free" (organic is always cage free), "free range," and "pasture" standards, which are confusingly distinct from marketing claims based on USDA definitions (see boxes to the right). While this label does offer spacing requirements, its animal welfare guarantee is minimal, and quality outdoor access is only a requirement for the "pastured" birds.

**PASTURE RAISED or PASTURED**  
This marketing claim must meet the USDA legal definition, but it may not mean what you think it does. USDA requires "continuous free access to the outdoors." Access does not mean that the birds are actually going outside or that the "pasture" is anything more than a dirt patch.

**FREE RANGE or FREE ROAMING**  
A step down from pasture raised, this USDA marketing claim prohibits cages. But "outdoor access" can be broadly interpreted to include screened porches with a concrete floor.



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## Co-op Spotlight

Photo courtesy of Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op



*Sacramento Natural Foods prides itself on sourcing the highest quality eggs available — and, on occasion, teaching its members how to transform them into silk-dyed art.*

### Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op

While some retailers are struggling to stock organic eggs, Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op relies on relationships with a wide range of producers, many of them certified organic, to keep up with demand.

The co-op also offers nuanced consumer education for those who want to dig deeper into their food choices. A flyer on Egg Facts, for example, clues shoppers into a little-known item: “Shell color is determined by the breed of the hen and is not related to quality, nutrients, flavor or cooking characteristics.”

This type of trusted information is just as vital as the high-quality products on the shelves and one of the many ways co-ops offer organic consumers value.