FOOD

Are posh eggs worth the cost? Plus omelette recipes from the top chefs

Maran Island browns, Araucana blues . . . rare-breed eggs have hit the mainstream. Tony Turnbull picks the best and gets expert cooking tips

Eggs and avocado on toast are an Instagram favourite

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Tony Turnbull | Friday July 02 2021, 12.00pm, The Times

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As sure as eggs is eggs, the saying goes. Except they aren't just eggs any more, are they? Have you seen the supermarket shelves recently? There are Blacktails and Burford Browns, Longstock Golds and Cotswold Legbars, Happy Eggs and Super Eggs, Rich Yolks and Golden Yolks . . . You need a degree in poultry management to make the right decision these days.

They aren't doing it just to confuse us, of course. We've become a nation of egg fanciers, with sales up 20 per cent on pre-pandemic levels to 22 million a day, according to the data company Kantar; #eggporn and #yolkporn have been getting on for 800,000 posts on Instagram (and only about half of them feature pictures of orange yolks oozing over every millennial's favourite avocado on toast) and the smartest producers flaunt their celebrity chef credentials.

So are you team Cacklebean, they of the chichi boxes that grace the smartest delis (Tom Kerridge, James Martin and Mary Berry), team Clarence Court (Mark Hix and Yotam Ottolenghi) or team St Ewe (Rick Stein and Gordon Ramsay)? And you thought all you had to agonise over was organic or free range.

Fry eggs in groundnut or olive oil
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Rebecca Tonks runs the family farm of St Ewe near Truro in Cornwall and supplies Ocado and supermarkets in the southwest of England. Together with a collective of local farms, they pack about a million eggs a week, which dwarfs the more boutique Cacklebean, based in the Cotswolds, but in turn puts them way behind the posh egg behemoth Clarence Court. What their eggs all share, though, is a rich creaminess that puts more intensively farmed eggs in the shade.

It's the breed of hen that dictates the colour of eggs, and while the dark brown shells of a Burford contrast beautifully with the pale blue of a Cotswold Legbar on an Instagram post, it makes no difference to the flavour. That is all down to the quality of the feed, and it's an expensive business making sure your hens are able to forage the right nutrients and to supplement their diet with the right mix of grains.

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"It's what's on the inside that counts because you don't eat the shell. Nutrition is everything," Tonks says. "If you have a well-fed hen, you are going to have a beautiful egg."

It's not necessarily true that a richly coloured yolk is the hallmark of a good-quality egg, though. Certainly a diet rich in maize and yellow flora such as marigold flowers will heighten the colour, and better eggs do tend naturally to be yellow verging on orange, but farmers can add pigment to the feed to control the colour, almost as if reading from a Farrow & Ball paint chart. So while it *looks* richer, it's sometimes just a question of aesthetics. The only real test is the flavour.

Rebecca Tonks at St Ewe Farm

"What people don't realise is eggs change with the seasons," Tonks says. "In the summer, just like humans, chickens eat less and drink more, and that means the colour of the yolks will be diluted."

There's no question, good eggs command a premium (Cacklebeans nudge £3 a half dozen, depending where you buy them, and Clarence Court and St Ewe are not far behind). So if you are going to make the investment, for heaven's sake make the most of them.

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The chefs' guide to the perfect soft-boiled egg

Chefs famously never agree about the best way to achieve that perfect balance of a just-set white and runny yolk. In a boil-off several years ago Giorgio Locatelli said that they should be constantly stirred for six minutes in boiling water. As if. Michel Roux Sr argued that you should start them in cold water and remove them 60 seconds after it comes to the boil.

Delia Smith's method is gospel for many and suits our eco-minded times in that you add your eggs to boiling water for one minute, then turn off the heat, put the lid on, and leave them for six minutes for soft. But I'm with Ramsay, who adds them to furiously boiling water, counts to five, then turns the gas right down and leaves them to cook. "Everyone asks, 'Is it four minutes for soft-boiled? Five minutes?' " he says. "Well, I've cooked thousands of them and every time it's four and a half minutes."

For a perfect soft-boiled egg, cook for four-and-a-half minutes, says Gordon Ramsay
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All I'd add is that you should cook them in a small pan so they don't rattle about too much (which increases the chances of cracking. Some people swear by making a pin prick in the wider end of the egg to allow the air pressure to escape, but, really, life is too short). To peel a boiled egg, roll it on a worktop to craze the shell and peel under running water, which allows you to remove the shell still attached to its thin membrane.

Poaching, the Michelin-starred way

Shallow pan or deep, vinegar or not, swirling water or still? I use the method shown to me by Marcus Wareing, where you crack your eggs into a saucer, add a drop of vinegar to the egg, then whisk the barely simmering water vigorously to create a swirling vortex. By the time the eggs drop to the bottom of the pan they should have formed a neat ball and take three minutes to cook.

Professionally poached eggs look so neat because they've been trimmed after cooking, and more than likely cooked in advance and held in iced water for up to two days, to be reheated for 30 seconds in boiling water. Nothing wrong with that.

I'll be honest, there are times when the egg whites simply won't enrobe the yolk and they make trails in the water. I assumed it meant I had used old eggs, but Tonks says that the age of an egg doesn't make much difference. It's the age of the hen you should worry about more.

"The secret really is to start with the right-sized egg," she says. "Large eggs are hopeless because generally they come from an older hen, and egg white is like the collagen in your skin — it gets looser as the hen ages, which means it goes stringy in the water. A medium egg will be from a younger hen, and the protein chain in the whites is tighter, so much easier to poach.”

Scrambled: lots of butter and gently does it

Don’t overbeat the eggs, be generous with the butter and heat until it foams. Stir intermittently with a spatula to create rich, silky curds and, most importantly, cook them as gently as you can be bothered. The side of the pan should never be too hot to touch, but be warned, it does take up to ten minutes for six eggs. Your reward will not just be perfect scrambled eggs, but a pan that needs no scrubbing.

The best oil for perfect fried eggs

For a silk-soft fried egg that looks like one of those pick’n’mix sweets use an oil such as groundnut or olive and start it off in a cold pan over a medium to low heat and don’t let the oil reach sizzling. It takes about five minutes, but you can speed it up by covering it with a lid.

For a more crisp, frilly and, to my mind, flavoursome fried egg use a large knob of butter and cook it over a medium heat, basting regularly with the butter. It should take about a minute and a half. And if you want a hard yolk, no harm in flipping it for a few seconds before serving.

The big question: in or out of the fridge?

Clarence Court recommends in; Rebecca Tonks of St Ewe says out, unless your house is very warm. Keep them at the same ambient temperature as they were in the shop, she suggests, about 16-18C. Remember, it’s changes in temperature that cause them to deteriorate, so if you do keep them in the fridge and (as recipes recommend) are bringing them to room temperature before cooking, only remove the eggs you need.