



Local Harvest

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Local Farm Profile: OK Egg Farm

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So how do you like your eggs? Sunny side up, scrambled, or even poached—don't they all seem to taste better if they're fresh? If you are looking for quality local eggs that have that un-beatable "fresh from the farm" taste, your search is over. OK Egg Farm just north of Elmira has been helping serve Waterloo Region and vicinity its breakfast for three generations. Now, that's not to say that eggs are exclusively for breakfast. Indeed eggs are a most versatile food and as such a mainstay of so many recipes it's really little wonder Loel and Phyllis Penner are extremely busy people and that their product is in such high demand!

It all started back in 1924, when Phyllis' grandfather Daniel Horst bought the farm on Arthur Street North, where the Penners now manage not only their flock of laying hens but also Waterloo Region's only egg grading station. Back then, Daniel Horst had a market garden and some laying hens and sold vegetables and fresh eggs at the Kitchener Farmers' Market. This business was later taken over by Phyllis' father Aaron and the farm has now passed to Phyllis and Loel. They've continued the family tradition and OK Egg Farm still sells at both the Kitchener and St. Jacobs Markets (formerly the Waterloo Market).

One big difference however came with the construction of a modern, high-tech grading station back in 2001. Although still considered a small facility, Loel and Phyllis are able to grade and pack eggs from other local farms. Nowadays, most egg farms are very large and the Penner's flock of 6,000 laying hens seems tiny compared to some operations that have 150,000 birds or more. Waterloo Region however, still has a number of smaller laying flocks and



Loel and Phyllis Penner of OK Egg Farm

the local, small producer really benefits from having the OK Egg Farm grading facility to handle, grade and pack their product. Now it's not only their own eggs that "make the grade".

Although we said small, small is still relative. With their new set-up, Phyllis and Loel grade 30,000 dozen eggs every week. That's more than 18 million eggs a year. Is it any wonder that egg marketers came up with the slogan "get cracking"!

These fresh, graded eggs that are truly the "pride of Waterloo Region" are now finding their way on to our plates. Besides the farmers' markets, if you live near or are driving by Elmira, OK Egg farm sells eggs right off their farm. They also have a grow-

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Local Farm Profile continued

ing business delivering “wholesale” eggs to various stores and some fine local restaurants throughout Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge and area.

By law, eggs that are sold off the farm must be graded. The grading process itself is quite involved and actually interesting to see. The eggs are delivered to the station’s refrigerated warehouse in plastic trays. These eggs are then sent on a delicate journey via conveyor that involves washing, drying, weighing and “candling”—candling involves the shining of light through the eggs to detect defects. The eggs are then graded, sorted by size, and packed in the familiar “egg cartons” (with eleven others) where they await shipment. When the OK Egg Farm grading station equipment is running, it can handle 45 dozen per minute and requires 6 people to operate the line.

Grading eggs is a time consuming task. So too are the other jobs that Loel and Phyllis do on a regular basis. Managing accounts, delivering eggs, selling at the markets—to say nothing of taking care of 6,000 hens. One might wonder where they find enough time in the day. Obviously it’s a labour of love. There must be something about the farming lifestyle that keeps families, like the Penners, doing what they’re doing. Phyllis said “she never wanted to marry a farmer”. She and Loel met while they were both with the Mennonite Central Committee in the States. Unfortunately for her (or fortunately for us!), Loel decided he’d like to try his hand at the farming business and the couple wound up back in Elmira on Phyllis’ family’s farm. After a few years run-

ning the farm in partnership with Phyllis’ dad, they figured farming was for them and took over the operation.

Although they grade eggs for nearly 40 local farms, they still find time to manage their own flock. They also sell eggs from 3 farms that have free-run, flax fed chickens. These eggs have the beneficial Omega 3 fatty acids that many people are now looking for. The birds aren’t fed any extra hormones, anti-biotics or medications, or any other non-natural additives so you can rest assured that these farm-fresh are eggs good for you and your family. The Penners sell these “flax fed, free run” eggs exclusively at the Kitchener and St. Jacobs Farmers’ Markets. They might cost a little more, but discerning shoppers will get the value they’re looking for.

Customers who’ve found the Penners at the markets are a dedicated bunch. If OK Egg Farm eggs aren’t available, they’ll go without. It might be the quality of the eggs. It might also be that both Loel and Phyllis are truly down to earth farmers and “people persons”. According to Phyllis, going to market for so many years, “it becomes one big family”. They’ve taken the time to get to know their regular customers and it all adds up to a positive experience. You might even say it’s an “egg-cellent” experience and that’s “no yolk”! ●



Grading 30,000 dozen eggs a week



“Candling” the eggs



OK Egg Farm

Phyllis and Loel Penner
3942 Arthur St. North, Elmira ON
(519) 669-4880

**Waterloo Region’s Freshest,
Graded Eggs**

Kitchener and St. Jacobs Farmers’ Markets
Wholesale delivery to Kitchener-Waterloo,
Cambridge and area

Be sure and find Loel and Phyllis at the Kitchener and St. Jacob’s Markets year-round or visit the farm at 3942 Arthur St. North, Elmira Ontario. For wholesale orders and delivery of Waterloo Region’s freshest eggs call (519) 669-4880.



Making the Grade: The Story of Eggs

For many people, eggs are a refrigerator staple hardly noticed until the carton is empty. Then...no pancakes, or cookies! No cake or quiche! And the better half of bacon and eggs is missing. Human beings have long consumed eggs of all sorts – from hens, ducks, geese, partridges, pigeons, pheasants, ostriches, peacocks, and other bird species. Eggs have a long tradition in many cultures that can be traced back 5000 years to India and 3500 years to Egypt and China. However, chickens were not native to the Americas and were probably brought over by Chinese or European explorers.

People ate eggs for a variety of reasons. Since eggs represented life – from conception to birth – some sought to absorb their magical properties by eating them. Others ate them to ensure fertility. In Germany, people once smeared their hoes with eggs, in the hope of transferring the eggs' fertility to the soil. In seventeenth-century France, a bride broke an egg when she first entered her new home. In Iran, brides and grooms exchanged eggs. The Chinese and other tribal groups of southern Asia used the eggs of chickens and ducks to divine the future by painting them, boiling them, and reading the patterns in their cracks. Oomancy, or the practice of divining the future with eggs, was also practiced by the Greeks and involved separating the eggs, tossing the whites into boiling water, and analyzing the resulting shapes.

However, the perception of eggs as symbols of fertility and life force compelled people of certain cultures to not only shun them as food but to protect them from destruction. For example, certain aborigines in Australia believed they descended from the emu, so they placed strict taboos on eating eggs of these ancestral birds

Easter Eggs

In the 9th century, eating eggs during the 46 days of Lent was banned. They, therefore, became extremely popular at Easter. The eggs were collected and saved and, once the fasting was over, made into large Easter omelets. With so many eggs about, people began to use the last days of winter to decorate eggs to

give to family, friends, and even the King. By the 16th century, these springtime eggs were all the rage at the court of France, with some being decorated by a few of the greatest artists of the day. However, the popularity of the Easter egg reached untold heights at the court of the Czar of Russia. By the end of the 19th century, the court jeweler, Carl Fabergé, was making fabulous eggs of gold, crystal and porcelain. Today, hand-decorated eggs are exchanged as springtime gifts in many cultures, and candy eggs play an important role in Easter morning ceremonies!

The Origins of Some Egg Dishes

The omelet comes to us from France, and the word may have originated from "lamelle" (thin strip). Others contend that the word is latin in origin, "ova mellita", which was a classic Roman dish consisting of beaten eggs and honey cooked on a flat clay dish. A cookbook from 1769 (*The Experienced English Housekeeper*) gives this recipe for an omelet: "To make an Omelette. Put a quarter of a pound of butter into a frying pan. Break six eggs and beat them a little, strain them through a hair sieve. Put them in when your butter is hot and strew in a little shred parsley and boiled ham scraped fine with nutmeg, pepper and salt..." While perhaps a bit too high in fat for modern tastes, this recipe remains almost unchanged.

At brunches and picnics, the devilled egg has long been a favourite dish. Devilling meat and eggs became popular in the 18th century and referred to cooking foods with hot spices or condiments such as cayenne or mustard. For the timid English palate, this may have been somewhat of a "hell-ish" experience.

What is an Egg

An egg is a reproductive cell from which a new organism develops. This will occur only if the egg has been fertilized. Most commercially produced chicken eggs intended for human consumption are unfertilized, since the laying hens are kept without roosters. An egg is an oval, with one end larger than



the other. It is surrounded by a thin, hard shell. Inside, the egg yolk is suspended in the egg white by one or two spiral bands of tissue called the *chalazae*.

Egg Production

A hen begins to lay eggs at about 19 weeks of age. On average, it will take her 24 to 26 hours to make and lay one egg. She will rest – as short as half an hour – before the cycle begins once again. With modern breeding and feeding practices, a typical hen today will lay about 5 eggs a week, or about 260 eggs a year. This contrasts sharply to 1945 when the average hen laid 151 eggs.

The most common laying hen in Canada is the White Leghorn, which produces the white-shelled eggs. The Rhode Island Red lays brown eggs. A hen's feed will determine the colour of the egg yolk. A hen that eats a wheat-based diet (more common in the West) produces a pale yellow yolk, while a hen that consumes a corn or alfalfa-based diet produces a dark yellow yolk. Neither the colour of the shell nor the yolk makes any nutritional difference to the eggs.

Sizing and Grading

After eggs are laid, gathered and washed, they are graded and sized before they're packed



into cartons, large end up to keep the air cell and yolk in place. The grade is decided by checking both the outside and the inside of the egg.

On the outside, the checker looks to see if the shell is clean and unbroken and has a normal shape and texture. To look inside, the eggs are moved on rollers over a strong light. In the past, a candle was held up behind the egg so that the checker could look inside, and this is why grading today is still called “candling”. On the inside, the checker looks to see if the white is firm, thick and clear. The checker also looks to see if the yolk is the right size and shape and has no blemishes.

The air cell determines the grade given to the egg – the smaller the cell, the higher the grade. Eggs in Canada are graded A, B and, C with A being the highest.

Grade A is best for frying and poaching since the whites are more firm. They won't spread out as much in the frying pan and there won't be as much broken white when poached.

Grade B is better for hard-cooking. In B grade eggs, the air cells are very small and therefore the membranes are very tight up against the shells. This makes it harder to peel off the shells without taking some of the whites along with them. Because the thinnest whites are in grade C eggs, the yolks sometimes move around inside the eggs. This can cause the yolks to be off center.

Any grade can be used for scrambled eggs, omelets, quiches and baked goods or any other recipe in which the shape of the egg isn't important. Once you beat them up, all the different grades of eggs will work the same in a recipe. Grade C eggs don't look as pretty as grade A or B, but they have the same good nutrition. You won't usually find grade C eggs in the stores as most are made into egg products.

Eggs are sized by weight. Small eggs are at least 42g, medium eggs at least 49g, large eggs at least 56g and extra large eggs at least 63g. Anything larger than 70g rates as jumbo!

How to Determine Freshness

Egg cartons are stamped with a best before date that indicates how long the eggs will maintain their Grade quality. This is usually set at 35 days after grading.

A fresh egg will sink in water while an older egg will float since it has a larger air sac inside. In a fresh egg, the yolk sits up high and the white is thick. Therefore, if you break an egg and see a flat yolk with a thin, watery white, it is likely an older egg. Lastly, a cloudy egg white is a sign of freshness due to its higher carbon dioxide content.

How to Store Eggs

Eggs should always be stored in the egg carton as it protects them and prevents the thousands of tiny pores from absorbing odors and flavours of other foods. The carton should be stored in the main body of the fridge where the temperature is cooler and more consistent. Food stored in the fridge door is subject to temperature variations as it is opened and closed.

Fabulous Clafoutis Recipe

This simple custard-like dessert is a mainstay in French cuisine and is often featured at the end of a family dinner. The fruit provides a sweet accompaniment to the fresh eggs.

Ingredients:

- 1 ½ lb (675g) fresh pitted cherries or 300g pitted prunes
- ½ cup (50g) flour
- Pinch of salt
- 5 Fresh **OK Egg Farm Eggs**
- ½ cup (115g) sugar
- 2 ½ cups (600ml) vanilla soy milk or cow milk
- ¼ cup melted butter
- Icing sugar for dusting

Preparation:

Preheat oven to 350. Melt butter in a shallow ovenproof dish in the oven. Sift the flour and salt into a bowl and whisk in eggs, sugar and milk to make a smooth batter. Pour in melted butter, retaining some in the dish. Place cherries or prunes in dish and carefully pour batter over top. Bake for 40-50 minutes until golden and just set. Sprinkle with icing sugar while still warm. Eat warm or cold.

An egg-tremely important fact:

How do you tell the difference between a raw egg and a hard-cooked egg? Spin it. A hard-cooked egg spins longer because the liquid centre in the raw egg stops it from building up enough momentum to keep it turning.



Nutrition

Egg White: The egg white consists of such high-quality protein that it has been used for years as the standard against which other protein foods are judged. Protein is the basic material of life. We need it for building and repairing body tissues and producing antibodies which fight off infection.

Egg Yolk: The egg yolk provides many vitamins and minerals including vitamin A, D, E, B12, riboflavin, folic acid, iron, zinc and phosphorus. These nutrients promote good vision, maintain healthy skin, improve resistance to infection, build healthy red blood cells and maintain the central nervous system. The yolk also contains cholesterol, but The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada maintains that most people can eat eggs in moderation without any harmful increase in blood cholesterol.

Eggs contain all nine essential amino acids, making them a complete protein food. As well, they are one of the few foods that naturally contain vitamin D. They are relatively low in saturated fat and provide 70 calories per egg. ●