

The S&S Homestead Foodbook

Chapter Six

Chicken and Egg



Table of Contents

Chicken218
Eggs223

Chicken

Our chickens are raised mainly for egg production, and the eggs are wonderful because we feed the chickens well. In fact, they eat the same foods we do: grain, potatoes, fruits, and vegetables. Instead of going into the garbage or the compost, leftovers and vegetable peelings are cooked and mixed with organically grown barley. Every day, the chickens eat a breakfast of cooked potatoes, vegetables, and organically grown barley. We feed the birds in the morning and leave them in the pen to digest breakfast and lay their eggs. In the afternoon, we let them out to forage on seeds, grass and bugs. In the evening, they return to the pen for a supper of whole grain. Because of the feed, their eggs have deep-orange yolks that stand high above the whites. The eggs are flavorful, low in cholesterol and high in Omega 3s.

Our flocks vary – typically we have white Leghorns, Buff Orpingtons, and Speckled Sussex hens, and keep one rooster.

We especially appreciate Sussex and Buffs because they are heirloom breeds. Large, calm, bosomy birds, they forage, brood out their eggs, and raise their young. Raising purchased chicks is tricky and time consuming. They are sent by mail (newly hatched chicks can survive for three days on the protein in their bodies). As soon as they arrive, we teach them to drink water, put them in a cage, and then constantly monitor and adjust air temperature, water, feed, and space. If pecking starts, we have to set up a hospital facility. After a few weeks, we put them in a large cage on pasture, and move the cage every day so that the chicks have fresh clover. After they are half grown, we build a section into the chicken run where the chicks can be fed separately and get used to the rest of the flock. When we begin to let them out in the afternoons, they are often pecked by the mature birds, and for a time we have to seek them at night because they are not used to coming back into the pen.



Chicks brooded out and raised naturally are a totally different story. Their mothers provide warmth, lead them into shade, teach them how to peck and scratch, take dust baths and defend themselves, and keep them with the flock. The chicks, free of stress, do not peck each other.

Tragically, many breeds of chickens have had all the health and instincts bred out of them. Factory egg-layers are, in the words of Jo Robinson, “Vaccinated, medicated, debeaked, confined in cages, fed high energy diets, and exposed to a carefully

orchestrated lighting environment... They have little room to move, breathe large amounts of ammonia and fecal dust, and can become literally paralyzed with ‘cage fatigue’. Once their production declines, they may be rewarded for their efforts by being ground up and fed to other chickens as ‘spent hen meal’”(30).

Ours hens run around all day and therefore are usually too muscular for frying or baking, although they can be stewed or roasted. One year, hungry for fried chicken, we tried to raise Cornish-cross hens for meat. But we found this breed too hybridized to raise successfully using our organic and free-range farming methods. They were sweet birds with croaky little voices and, though we penned them separately and spoiled them rotten, half of them didn’t survive. They could not forage for themselves, and, in some cases, could not even defecate naturally. (It was not fun to help them do this.) This breed needs antibiotics and sterile conditions in order to survive. They are bred to grow rapidly, reaching slaughter size in just a few weeks. Often, their legs break or their hearts give out after that. It was a sad experience. (Note: there are folks who raise Cornish cross successfully and organically, but do have to give them special conditions and treatment. Find out how your frying bird was raised before you buy it from the farmer.)

What Do Chickens Say?

The health of our birds is of concern because it affects our own health, and keeps us responsible as farmers who raise animals humanely. But there is another benefit: learning about the complex social lives of chickens. There are many books available about the social lives of wild animals – chimpanzees, gorillas, lions, and so on. But very little is written about the social lives of domestic animals, unless they are pets – dogs, cats, and horses, for example. (Two notable exceptions are Van Loon’s *The Family Cow* and Carlson’s *Cattle: An Informal Social History*. See *References* in this book for bibliographic information.) Yet the social lives of our cows, pigs, sheep, and chickens are endlessly interesting. Watching and listening to them will dispel forever the notion that these animals are “dumb” – in any sense.

We know when the rooster is calling to his hens because he has found food for them, and wants to curry a little favor. We know the difference between clucking that indicates hunger, egg laying, or a hawk or eagle overhead. Most engaging is the communication between hen and chicks.

Hens gone broody are unmistakable. They puff their feathers out, go glassy eyed, refuse to leave the nest, and eat and drink very little. When we have a broody hen, we move her from the communal egg-laying box to a broody box, dark and sheltered, behind the barn kitchen. We gather eggs from the Sussex and Orpingtons, but not from the Leghorns (the difference is in the color – brown or white – and we do not want a Leghorn cross, because they are bred to be egg producers, and mothering instincts have been bred out of them). We write the dates the eggs were laid on each egg, making sure the eggs were laid no more than three days apart, and place them under the broody hen. 21 days later, the fertile eggs will hatch. When hatching time is near, we can hear the chicks cheeping when we pick up the eggs to check on them. As the chicks begin to peck their way out of the shell, the hen will either cluck contentedly or shrill a warning. If she gives the first call, the chick keeps pecking. At the second, the chick goes still.

Once chicks are hatched, they and the mother hen cheep and cluck to each other constantly. The mother has different clucks for “Danger – come sit under me”, “Where are you?” and “Food!” And, to the other chickens, that angry screech followed by a hard peck that wards them off from her chicks.

We have learned the languages of all our animals. We know when the dogs are barking at a crow and when they are greeting guests. How often we’ve lain in bed in the dawn hours and said, “There’s a lamb out.” “There’s a heifer in heat.” “The cows need to be moved to the next pasture.”

All that said, we do not forget that we raise our animals for food. The day we slaughter our young roosters and the elderly hens is always a sober day. We separate them from the other birds, put them in a cage, and let them calm down. Henning quiets each bird by holding it upside down, and dispatches it quickly with an axe. I scald and pluck the birds and Henning cleans them, saving stomachs, livers, and hearts for broth. We separate them into roasting, stewing and broth birds, and freeze their carcasses. And they provide our sustenance.

We know that our birds are contented, clean, and healthy. They do not have to be dusted with pesticides because their coop and run are clean, and they take dust baths to rid themselves of vermin. You should know at least that much about the birds you buy in the store. Labels can be deceiving. Jo Robinson points out that a “Free Range Bird” may have been allowed out of its cage, but may have “ranged on hard-baked clay or cement, without a blade of grass or a worm in sight.” “Free Range Chickens” may have been fed arsenic to increase their appetites, or given antibiotics to combat the diseases that spread rapidly among animals kept confined in unhealthy conditions. Insist on truth in labeling. Most important, know the farmer who raised the birds that will feed your family.

Coq au Vin

This recipe is adapted from *The Joy of Cooking*.

1 stewing chicken, skinned and cut into quarters. Reserve the wings and back for making broth.

3 T olive oil

3 slices bacon, cut into 1 inch pieces

1 chopped onion

1 chopped carrot

2 chopped garlic cloves

2 T flour

2 T minced parsley

1 T marjoram

1 bay leaf

1 tsp thyme

1 tsp salt

A sprinkling of peppercorns

Dry red wine, enough to cover the chicken

½ lb sliced mushrooms

3 T sour cream

In a Dutch oven sauté the onion, garlic and carrot in the olive oil. The bacon should be cooked but not crisp, the garlic should cook, but not brown.

Remove the bacon, carrots and garlic with a slotted spoon, and reserve. Brown the chicken parts in the flavored oil.

Pour the wine over the chicken until it is covered. Add the reserved vegetables and bacon, and the herbs, salt and pepper. Simmer slowly until the meat is tender enough to come free of the bones but still firm.

Remove the chicken from the broth and set aside to cool.

Strain the broth, and put the vegetables and herbs in the compost. Pick out the bacon and set it aside.

Put 4 T of the broth back in the Dutch oven. Heat to nearly boiling, then whisk in the flour and sour cream. As the mixture firms, ladle in the broth a cup at a time, whisking vigorously to remove lumps. When you have a rich broth, add the mushrooms and remove the pot from the heat.

Pull the chicken off the bones in large chunks. Put it back in the pot with the mushrooms and reserved bacon, adjust the seasoning (at this point you can add herbs, salt and ground pepper to taste) and allow to simmer until the chicken and mushrooms are tender and the bacon is fully cooked.

Serve over rice.

Roasted Chicken

1 roasting bird

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

Sage, garlic granules, salt and pepper.

Roasting is a slow cooking process, and even a free-range bird with lots of muscle will become tender.

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees.

Wash the bird thoroughly, and rub it with olive oil, salt, pepper, and herbs. Place it on the middle rack in a shallow roasting pan, and immediately reduce the heat to 350 degrees. On the lower oven rack, place a pan of water. The steam from the water will keep the roasting bird tender. Roast about 20 minutes per pound, basting the bird from pan drippings frequently.

Chicken Broth

This wonderful broth is the basis for soups and a dozen different dishes. With a few herbs and French bread, it can be a complete meal. Henning, ever the gourmet, drops a raw egg into his bowl and pours the hot broth over it.

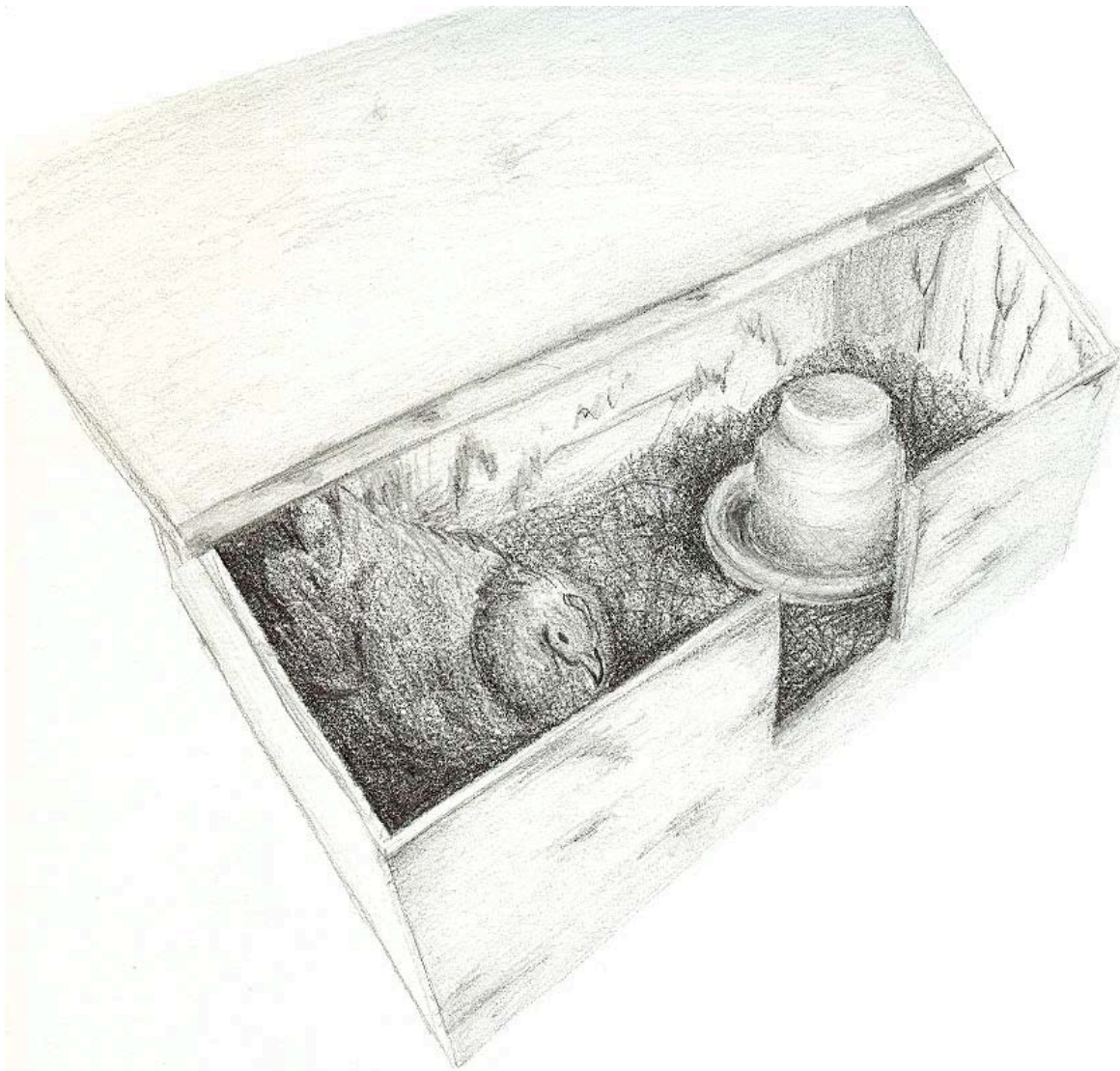
The difference between the chicken broth you make yourself and the cans of high-sodium, low-flavored broth you can buy in the store is immeasurable. Most cities allow backyard chicken raising; if you cannot do this, buy your chickens for broth from a farmer who feeds and treats them well.

[Chicken and Egg]

If you are starting with whole chickens, cut them into rough parts, and include the skin, heart, liver, and stomach. Cook as many at a time as possible, so you have plenty of broth on hand.

Place the chicken parts in a large, stainless steel pot, and cover with water. Add vinegar to extract bone marrow. Add celery, carrots, and onions to flavor the broth as it cooks. Simmer very slowly, until the chicken is dropping off the bones. (I cook broth over three days' time.) Strain the broth and freeze or pressure can it.

Much of the flavor and nutrition are in the fat of chicken broth, and I always include it – but would only do so with organically raised chickens. Use the broth as a first course, or add cooked noodles or barley and fresh or frozen vegetables for a complete meal. Season with herbs, salt and pepper to taste.



Eggs

Eggs from pastured chickens are among the best foods you can eat. “They constitute the most complete, nutritious, and economical form of any animal protein available and are valued by traditional cultures throughout the world” (Fallon, 32). But do buy locally raised eggs. Eggs from pastured chickens contain 10 percent less fat, 40 percent more vitamin A, and 400 percent more omega-3 fatty acids, and substantial amounts more of vitamin E, B12, carotenes, and antioxidants than factory farmed eggs you can buy at the grocery store.

Eggs are noted for their amino acid profile, containing all the amino acids necessary for complete protein synthesis in the human body. While the whites are mostly protein and water, the yolks contain iron, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, and vitamins A, D, and B-complex. So don't toss the yolks.

Many people avoid eggs altogether, or use just the whites because of their concern about cholesterol. They might want to rethink their decision. First, eggs from pastured hens, which ingest fresh greens every day, have 34 percent less cholesterol than those from hens kept in confinement. Second, the link between cholesterol and heart disease is far from established. I recommend Sally Fallon's *Nourishing Traditions* for a detailed discussion of the controversy.

It is important to pay attention to what animals eat, because you will ingest the nutrition and flavor of what they have eaten. Factory raised hens ingest feeds that contain chemicals, antibiotics, and arsenic (to increase the hens' appetites).

Here on the farm we feed the chickens a homemade diet of our own organically grown barley, fresh and cooked vegetables, mashed potatoes, and leftovers from our own table. We also grind eggshells into their food as a source of calcium.

Culinary tips:

- Commercially produced eggs are called “fresh” for up to six weeks.
- Eggs actually have three shells: the inner skin, the hard shell, and an outer coating, which prevents the entry of bacteria into the egg. If possible, the local eggs you buy should be unwashed.
- Truly fresh eggs (less than three days old) should not be used in baking – they will not allow a cake to rise (as I have learned the hard way).
- Fresh eggs (less than a week old), when hard boiled, will not peel easily. A lot of the outer flesh will come away with the peel. You can mitigate this problem by adding vinegar to the water in which you boil the eggs, which allows the shell to expand. After boiling, cool the eggs immediately, and peel. The vinegar will not affect the flavor of the egg. An alternative is to wait several hours while the eggs sit in very cold water before peeling them.

- Specific recipes for omelets, quiches, and frittatas are found in sections for the vegetables that go into them.

Egg Salad

I love having this salad on hand: it keeps for weeks, is good by itself or on bread, and you can increase amounts as needed to feed a crowd. All the amounts are approximate, according to taste.

1 dozen eggs, hard-boiled, peeled, and chopped
Five stalks celery, diced
1 large onion, diced
Mayonnaise
Mustard
Salt
Pepper
Paprika
Dill weed

Mix the eggs, celery, and onion in a large bowl. In a separate bowl, mix mayonnaise, mustard, salt, pepper, paprika and dill, amounts to taste. Add the dressing to the salad gradually – don't drown it.

Eggs and Polenta

This recipe is adapted from one in *The New York Times* food section. It has become one of my favorite fast dinners. I had avoided cooking polenta ever since I spent an evening with friends and family making a polenta dish – we stirred, and stirred, and stirred, taking turns as our arms wore out. The results were delicious, but I thought it was too much trouble – and not a food I wanted to make without a backup cook with strong muscles. Then I found this recipe, tried it again, and it was a breeze. I suspect that the polenta in the first instance was a heavier consistency than the fine organic meal I buy at the local natural foods store.

The eggs are the key to this dish. They should be fresh, free-range eggs from happy, well-fed hens. The orange yolks become a delicious sauce that carries the textures and flavors of the polenta and cheese right to your palate. This recipe will feed four to six.

4 & ½ C water
1 & ½ C polenta
¾ tsp salt
4 T butter
A generous grind of pepper
½ C grated Parmesan cheese
2 T olive oil
2 eggs for each serving

[Chicken and Egg]

In a large pot, bring water to a simmer. Stir in polenta and salt. Simmer, stirring frequently, until thickened, about 20 minutes. Stir in butter and pepper; cover pot to keep warm.

In a large skillet, fry the eggs quickly in the olive oil. They may be sunny side up or briefly turned to cook the egg white, but the yolks should be runny.

Put a serving of the warm polenta on each plate, and generously spread the grated cheese over it. Top with eggs.

I like to serve this with greens that have a little bite to offset the mild flavors of the polenta and eggs: kale, spinach, or chard with a dash of tarragon vinegar is a wonderful accompaniment.

Baked Custard

This healthy, delectable dish is great for breakfast, lunch, afternoon or evening snacks, or dessert. We like to top it with fresh or frozen raspberries.

2 C whole (preferably raw) milk
1/3 C honey
1/8 tsp salt
2 large eggs, preferably from organically fed, free-range hens
½ tsp vanilla
Nutmeg

Beat milk, honey, salt, and eggs together. Add vanilla and beat again. Ladle into six custard cups. Sprinkle with nutmeg. Place the cups on a rack over a shallow baking dish. Place in a 300 degree oven. Pour an inch of hot (but not boiling) water into the baking dish. Bake for 30 minutes, or until a knife inserted into the center of the custard comes out clean. Top with berries.

Spanish Tortilla

Most of us think of a tortilla as the flat round corn or flour shells that make such delicious wraps. But in Spain, a tortilla (“little cake”) is a delicious dish of eggs and potatoes. You can order a slice of tortilla in a tapas bar to accompany your sherry or wine or beer.

2 T olive oil
1 large onion, peeled, halved, and thinly sliced
2 lbs potatoes, peeled and thinly sliced
¾ tsp salt
½ tsp pepper
5 large eggs
Fresh herbs, such as chives, parsley, thyme or tarragon
Chili sauce and/or sour cream (optional)

Pour olive oil into a cast iron frying pan over medium heat. When hot, add onion and cook until tender. Add potatoes, ½ tsp salt, and ¼ tsp pepper. Add 1/3 C water and

[Chicken and Egg]

bring to a boil; reduce heat to medium and cook, covered, until potatoes are tender and water has evaporated.

In a large bowl, beat eggs with remaining salt, pepper, and minced herbs. Add potato mixture to the eggs and mix gently. Set unwashed pan over medium heat, and pour in egg mixture. Reduce heat to low and cook until eggs begin to set and the bottom is lightly browned.

Place the pan in the oven about six inches under the broiler and broil until the top is set. Cut into wedges and serve with chili sauce and/or sour cream.