

Cracking the Mystery of the Egg

By Rebecca Lang

We've cooked with them for centuries, but the egg is still one of the mysteries that remains uncracked, even among the most seasoned of chefs. They can be found in almost every refrigerator, but few cooks have truly delved beneath the shell of this culinary powerhouse. With each American eating more than 250 eggs a year on average, the humble egg certainly deserves our attention and understanding.

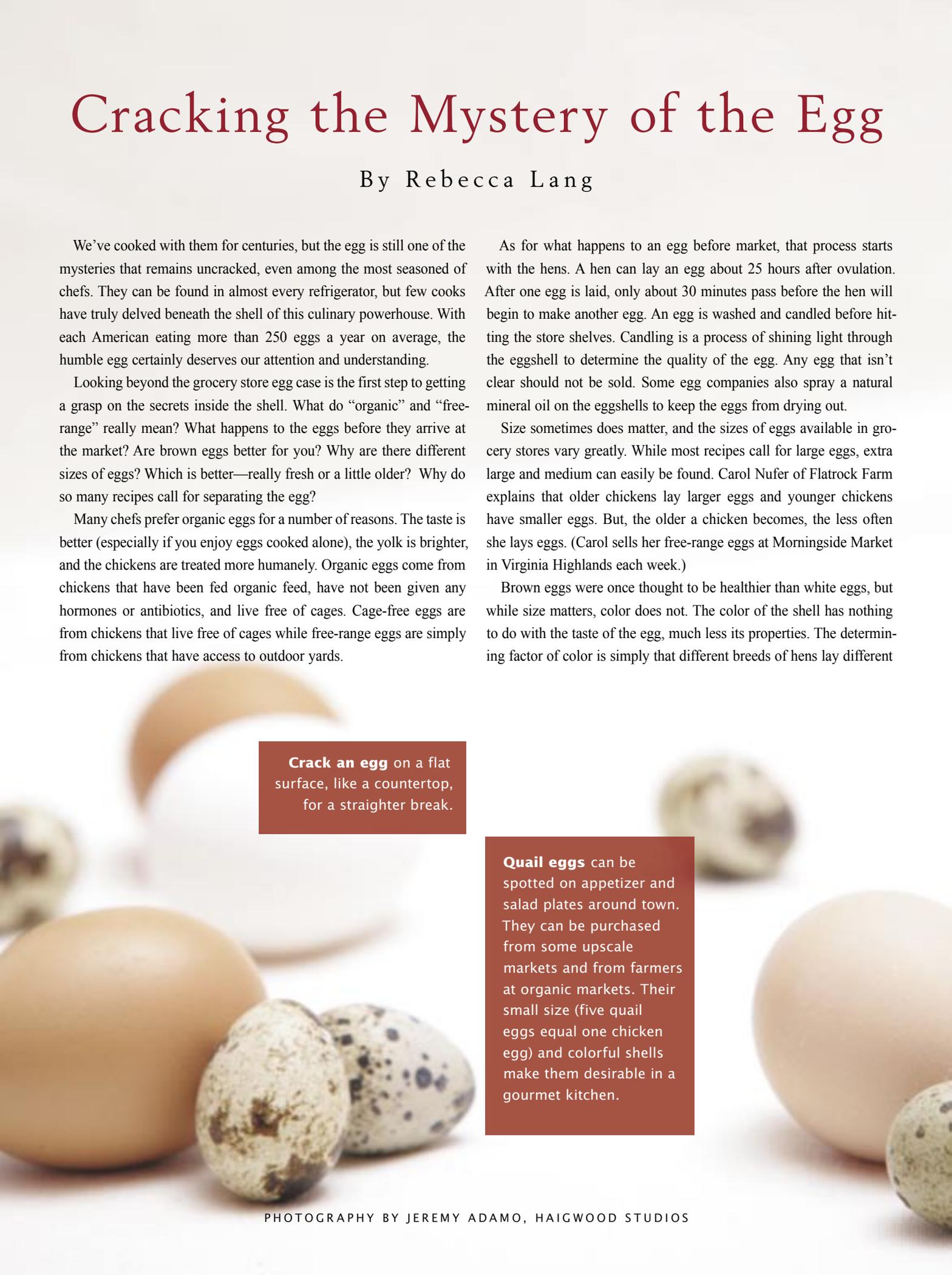
Looking beyond the grocery store egg case is the first step to getting a grasp on the secrets inside the shell. What do "organic" and "free-range" really mean? What happens to the eggs before they arrive at the market? Are brown eggs better for you? Why are there different sizes of eggs? Which is better—really fresh or a little older? Why do so many recipes call for separating the egg?

Many chefs prefer organic eggs for a number of reasons. The taste is better (especially if you enjoy eggs cooked alone), the yolk is brighter, and the chickens are treated more humanely. Organic eggs come from chickens that have been fed organic feed, have not been given any hormones or antibiotics, and live free of cages. Cage-free eggs are from chickens that live free of cages while free-range eggs are simply from chickens that have access to outdoor yards.

As for what happens to an egg before market, that process starts with the hens. A hen can lay an egg about 25 hours after ovulation. After one egg is laid, only about 30 minutes pass before the hen will begin to make another egg. An egg is washed and candled before hitting the store shelves. Candling is a process of shining light through the eggshell to determine the quality of the egg. Any egg that isn't clear should not be sold. Some egg companies also spray a natural mineral oil on the eggshells to keep the eggs from drying out.

Size sometimes does matter, and the sizes of eggs available in grocery stores vary greatly. While most recipes call for large eggs, extra large and medium can easily be found. Carol Nufer of Flatrock Farm explains that older chickens lay larger eggs and younger chickens have smaller eggs. But, the older a chicken becomes, the less often she lays eggs. (Carol sells her free-range eggs at Morningside Market in Virginia Highlands each week.)

Brown eggs were once thought to be healthier than white eggs, but while size matters, color does not. The color of the shell has nothing to do with the taste of the egg, much less its properties. The determining factor of color is simply that different breeds of hens lay different



Crack an egg on a flat surface, like a countertop, for a straighter break.

Quail eggs can be spotted on appetizer and salad plates around town. They can be purchased from some upscale markets and from farmers at organic markets. Their small size (five quail eggs equal one chicken egg) and colorful shells make them desirable in a gourmet kitchen.



color eggs. Eggs can range from brown to white to pale green and blue. Next time you find yourself in a henhouse, check the color of the hen's ears and you'll know what egg color to expect.

The freshness of eggs is always a large factor for savvy food shoppers. Most people think that fresh is best. However, some recipes are more successfully made with older eggs. Using eggs at least seven days old for hard-cooked eggs makes peeling them much easier. Poached eggs, on the other hand, are much better with fresher eggs.

Once home from the market, store your eggs in the original cartons in the back of the refrigerator. The cartons help stop odors from seeping through the shell. The back of the refrigerator is the coldest area and keeps the eggs fresher longer.

Shirley Corriher, author of *Cookwise*, recommends ways for checking the freshness of an egg. While still in the shell, place the egg in a bowl of water. If the egg lies flat on the bottom of the bowl, it is very fresh. A bobbing egg is slightly older and a floating egg is much older

cracking the mystery

and even may be rotten. After breaking the shell, look for the thick area of egg white around the yolk. A fresher egg has a thicker white. A prominent chalazae, the collection of white-colored strings attached to the yolk, is also a sign of freshness. The chalazae holds the yolk in place so it doesn't bounce around inside the shell. As an egg ages, the chalazae deteriorates.

Think of an egg as a yolk and a white. They each perform very different functions and, in turn, balance each other perfectly. An egg yolk is a perfect emulsifier. Yolks are added to dishes for moisture, richness, and creaminess. An egg white is "the most incredible drying agent in nature," says Shirley Corriher. The whites are also prized for their leavening and clarifying power. Egg whites even absorb grease during frying- one of the reasons why tempura, typically coated with an egg white batter, is so crispy and light, even after being deep-fried.

The egg will forever be cherished for qualities that nothing else in the kitchen can duplicate. As cooks, we open a carton to make our recipes fluffier, lighter, higher-rising, and creamier-tasting. To overlook the egg, with all its qualities, is to make a ruinous turn on the road to culinary excellence.

Prosciutto Eggs Benedict

Yield: 4 servings

4 English muffins, halved and toasted
16 thin slices prosciutto
8 eggs, poached
Blender Hollandaise

Top each English muffin half with 2 slices prosciutto and 1 poached egg. Spoon Easy Hollandaise over each egg.

Easy Hollandaise

3 egg yolks
1 1/2 tablespoons heavy cream
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 cup melted butter
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

Combine egg yolks, heavy cream, salt, and cayenne pepper in blender. On low speed, blend for 10 seconds until mixture is combined. Turn blender up to high speed and add butter in a thin stream, while the blender is running. After about one fourth of butter is added, add lemon juice. Continue until all the butter is added.



of the egg

After a culinary degree and seven years of food industry experience, I still think a perfectly boiled egg is one of the most difficult things to cook. On a bad day, my hardboiled yolks are shoved to one end of the egg and that green film is encasing the yellow yolk. Food scientist Shirley Corriher leads me down the path to beautifully boiled eggs. First, turn the egg carton on its side in the refrigerator to center the yolks the day before. Cover the eggs with one inch of water and bring to a gentle simmer. Simmer the eggs for 12 minutes. Rinse the eggs in cold water and shake the eggs in the empty pan to crack the shells. Peel under cold running water. The green layer is more likely to appear when the egg is cooked longer, so set the egg timer for this one.

Bacon Deviled Eggs

Yield: 24 pieces

12 large eggs, hardboiled
1/2 cup mayonnaise
3 slices bacon, cooked and crumbled
1/8 teaspoon salt
pinch of freshly ground pepper
1/8 teaspoon dry mustard
1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped
Fresh parsley, optional

Cut eggs in half lengthwise; remove the yolks with a small spoon. In a medium mixing bowl, stir yolks and mayonnaise until creamy. Stir in bacon, salt, pepper, and dry mustard. Fold in fresh parsley. Using a teaspoon or a small scoop, spoon yolk mixture back into egg whites. Garnish with fresh parsley if desired.



Baby Vidalia Frittata

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

2 tablespoons olive oil
4 baby Vidalia onions, thinly sliced
(white and green parts)
8 large eggs, beaten
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1 cup sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
Fresh parsley, chopped



Heat olive oil in a non-stick oven proof 10-inch skillet over medium heat. Add sliced onions and sauté for 6 minutes or until soft. Spread onions evenly over bottom of pan.

Combine eggs, salt, and pepper. Pour over onions. Cook, uncovered over low heat for 9 minutes. The center will still be wet.

Sprinkle 1 cup shredded cheese over top and broil until cheese is melted. Sprinkle with chopped parsley before serving.

Food Editor's Note: Eggs are quite nutritious. They are a rich source of fat-soluble vitamins as well as vitamins B2, B12, and folic acid. Lecithin in eggs is an important nutrient for the brain and nerves. Tryptophan, an amino acid found in eggs, generates serotonin – a chemical that makes you feel good.

Marsala Poached Pears with Sabayon

Yield: 8 servings

1 cup Marsala
3 cups water
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 cup sugar
8 Bosc pears

Combine first 4 ingredients in a large stockpot. Simmer until sugar has dissolved. Peel pears, leaving stems intact. Use a small paring knife to remove core by cutting a small circle out of the bottom of each pear. Place immediately in the poaching liquid. Poach pears, turning occasionally, until soft enough to easily pierce with a fork, about 40 minutes. Remove pears and set aside until ready to use, or refrigerate overnight.

For Sabayon:

4 egg yolks
2/3 cup Marsala
3 to 4 tablespoons sugar

Combine egg yolks, Marsala, and sugar in a stainless steel bowl. Place bowl over slightly simmering water. Reduce heat to low and whisk constantly, making sure to run whisk along the bottom of the bowl, for 7 to 8 minutes, or until frothy and tripled in volume. Remove from heat and serve warm over poached pears.

