



How do you like your eggs in the morning?

How do you achieve the perfect scramble or poach? How can you tell if an egg is addled? And is that double-yolker lucky or a harbinger of death? Claire Jackson divulges all

A FLASH of silver pierces the white orb, spilling its orange centre. The golden yolk, perfectly poached, mixes with the smoked paprika to form a tangerine river. On another plate, two fried eggs sit on a bed of *chermoula*-marinated vegetables. Yellow middles peep out from beneath a veil of sage. Notting Hill's Eggbreak boasts every variety of egg dish imaginable, from green *shakshuka* to a heart-stopping French toast and mascarpone. There are few ingredients that can sustain an entire menu, but eggs are special—eggstraordinary, even.

'Eggs are incredibly versatile,' points out Eggbreak's general manager, Hana Bachankova. 'Whether you're looking for something light to set you off for the day or something more decadent, such as our burrata and truffle scrambled eggs or eggbreaky melt, we've got plenty of options. Our eggs come from Fenton Farms in Holcombe Rogus [on the Devon/Somerset border].'

Eggs, however, are more than a foodstuff, having long served as objects of practicality and curiosity.

Artists and makers through the centuries have paid homage to their shape and composition, from the Fabergé Gatchina Palace,

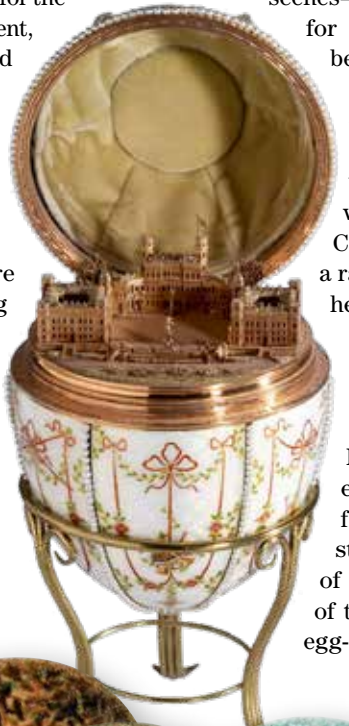
which contains a miniature gold replica of the St Petersburg palace in place of the yolk, to Cadbury's sugary approximation of a chicken's egg.

Before the invention of oil paints, eggs were mixed with pigment to form tempera, a practice that is periodically revived by enterprising artists, and the shells have been used as a canvas for thousands of years—archaeologists have found decorated ostrich-shell pieces in African tombs.

Egg blowing and decorating became a popular Victorian craft and remains a common, albeit seasonal, pastime. I am still mesmerised by my grandmother's collection—each shell carefully emptied, cleaned and painted, some containing tiny scenes—including an egggy enclave

for a miniature model of her beloved West Highland terrier.

Perhaps it's the sheer variety of shapes, shades and sizes that beguiles oologists, the term applied to those of us with an interest in bird eggs. Chicken eggs alone come in a rainbow of colours. My silkie hen's first egg was a pastel, chalky-blue specimen; I carefully marked the date on the shell with pencil and displayed it in a bowl in the kitchen. From time to time, I'd hold the egg gently, internalising its fragility as if it was an inverse stress ball. It's the delicacy of the structure that is part of the appeal—and the reason egg-and-spoon races are still >



Left: *Suspense* by Charles Burton Barber. Right: The Fabergé Gatchina Palace





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common sports-day fixtures. (It was a serious athletic endeavour for one Dale Lyons, who, in 1990, ran the London marathon with an egg and spoon.)

You’d need an enormous bucket to carry the eggs laid by the now-extinct Madagascan elephant bird. The largest ever known to have existed, they are thought to have comprised the equivalent of some 183 chicken eggs. Weighing in at about 4lb—the equivalent of 24 chicken eggs—the South African ostrich egg is the biggest around today. Thanks to White House Farm in Lincolnshire, which has specialised in ostrich meat and products since 1994, the supersized eggs are available at selected Waitrose branches via Clarence Court until September (£19.99).

Ostrich eggs are by no means the rarest of them all. Although poaching laws (pun intended) now ban hobbyists from collecting wild bird eggs, licensed ‘egggers’ continue to harvest black-headed gulls’ sage-green ovoids. Licence holders can only gather a certain number and must record their daily total on a log sheet. The season lasts from April 1 to May 15 and the eggs are served in selected restaurants, including Rules and The Goring in London.

‘We have a few regulars who look forward to the gull eggs each year, but we don’t sell them in large quantities,’ says Richard Galli, The Goring’s executive chef. The Michelin-starred dining room focuses on traditional British food, made using ingredients from

these fair isles, and the gull eggs are generally served with soldiers, as a special.

If you miss the gull-egg window, don’t despair: Mr Galli has another treat in store for intrepid diners. On a weekday afternoon, just before the busy dinner service begins, the chef opens up his kitchen to show me how best to prepare pheasant eggs (in season until June). ‘Run the egg under warm water before you cook it in lightly simmering—not boiling—water. Cook for three minutes until the egg is soft-boiled, then dunk it in iced water before peeling.’

On cue, Mr Galli removes the brown-green shells and places the eggs on brioche toast, adorning them with truffles, mushroom and watercress. The pale-yellow

yolk is much larger than most other eggs and saltier, with a more complex flavour, neatly enhanced by its accompaniments. This is no light, eggy supper—when paired with a crisp English white wine, it forms a luxurious meal.

Now for the science bit: eggs are formed when the ovum travels from the ovary down the oviduct to the magnum, where the albumen (the white part) is added. The partially formed egg is then passed further down, by squeezing movements, to the isthmus, where the membrane (clearly visible when peeling a boiled egg) is added. The egg then moves to the uterus, where the shell is formed, before the egg is eventually laid. In younger chickens, it isn’t unusual for two ova to travel down the magnum at the same time, which results in the fabled double-yolked egg.

‘The question ‘how do you like your eggs in the morning?’ is a quaint chat-up line,’

Humans have always been intrigued by this phenomenon (*see box*) and the probability of finding a double—or even triple—yolk remains common tabloid fodder. A recent story claimed that one man had found 12 double-yolk eggs in a row, reported to be at odds of 10 octillion to one.

My Rhode Island hybrids frequently produced double-yolkers—delicious for scrambled egg, a nightmare when baking—but a visit from Mr Fox put an end to the flock before it reached maturity, so admittedly my data is skewed (or scrambled).

Despite the fact that they’ve been eaten for centuries, there is a seemingly endless quest to cook the perfect egg. Delicious when fried, scrambled, poached or boiled, they are an essential element of a traditional breakfast. The question ‘how do you like your eggs in the morning?’ is a now rather quaint chat-up line, immortalised in Dean Martin and Helen O’Connell’s hit song from 1952: ‘How do you like your eggs in the morning? I like mine with a kiss/

As sure as eggs is eggs

• In chickens, eggshell colour is often related to the shade of the bird’s ear lobes: red-eared hens generally produce brown eggs (except for the delightfully named Easter eggers, which lay blue or green eggs) and white-eared hens tend to lay white

• Finding more than one yolk in an egg is said to be good luck, except in ancient Norse mythology, where it’s a harbinger of death. Western superstition has it that a double-yolk is a symbol of imminent pregnancy; most literally, twins

• The proverb ‘as good be an added egg as an idle bird’ is thought to have originated in the 16th century, when it was used as a reprimand for inactivity

• To check how fresh an egg is, place it in a bowl of cold water. If it lies almost flat on the bottom, it’s fresh. The higher it tilts, the older it is. If it floats to the top, don’t eat it and be careful not to break the shell—the smell will be appalling

• There are varying opinions on how best to store eggs. Some people claim they should always be kept in the fridge to prolong their life. However, if you’re lucky enough to have access to locally produced eggs, they are likely to be much fresher than supermarket options and will be fine kept out on display—a bowl of blue eggs is practically an *objet d’art*



Up or down/I’ll never frown, eggs can be almost bliss.’ Spoiler alert: they’re not only singing about eggs.

Delia Smith recommends bacon fat for frying eggs or, if that’s not possible, groundnut oil. Poached eggs are more controversial and have inspired an array of devices that promise to do the best job. These contraptions (once described as the ‘Devil’s work’ by a friend) may be over-engineering the issue. Jamie Oliver suggests cracking an egg into clingfilm drizzled with oil, tying it up to form a pouch and lowering it into simmering water. Nigella Lawson, on the other hand, uses a tea strainer to remove the watery whites, before sliding the egg into slightly cooled boiled water.

Egg-cooking fads may come and go, but there’s one dish that remains timeless. Eggs drumkilbo—a shellfish cocktail with chopped egg—was one of the Queen Mother’s favourite starters and something she regularly enjoyed at The Goring, where the meal is garnished with a quail’s egg. Mr Galli recommends cooking quail eggs for 1½ minutes, before immersing them in ice water. ‘Then, put them in cold water with some vinegar—it makes it easier to peel the shells,’ he reveals.

Clarence Court is one of the best-loved egg distributors, with chicken breeds

including Leghorn Whites and Burford Browns. It also sells eggs from goose, guinea fowl, pheasant, turkey, the aforementioned ostrich and rhea. The nicest, however, are surely those bought locally, on the roadside. There is nothing more cheering than a sign reading ‘Eggs’ alongside an honesty box. It is these set-ups that have given me the most delicious, powder-blue duck eggs, speckled quail creations and guinea-fowl brown beauties. Join me in raising a whisky sour (whisky, lemon juice, sugar and egg white) to the humble egg. 🐔



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