

[Brandywine Table]

Fresh Eggs — Pure Protein

RIGHT IN OUR BACKYARD

Laura Muzzi Brennan



Duane and Deb Ellis of Highspire Hills Farm (with Lola the goose in the background)

WHEN DUANE REHMEYER WAS WOOING Deborah Ellis, he showed up outside her 5th grade classroom with a dozen eggs. Some women might not know what to make of such a gesture, but Deb, who comes from an Iowa farming family, was charmed by the gift.

That was 1998. Back then, Duane was working as an engineer by day and raising 50 chickens on his Glenmoore farm as a hobby.

Fast forward two decades: Duane and Deb have been married 19 years. Duane still works as an engineer. Deb retired from teaching in the Coatesville School District and Pennsylvania's Mobile Agriculture Education Science Laboratory Program. And the chickens of **Highspire Hills Farms?** They now number 2,000, and with a little help from Duane and Deb, they supply home cooks and local chefs with eggs whose freshness and quality elevate any dish.

I became interested in Highspire eggs when EatNic chef Seth Arnold raved at length about them during an interview for last month's article, "Breakfast Anytime." Turns out, Arnold's got lots of company: Amani BYOB, the newly opened Suburban Restaurant and Beer Garden, The Silver-spoon, Ron's Original Bar and Grille, Kimberton Inn and

Malvern Buttery all source their eggs from Highspire.

When I visited Highspire on a freezing February day, I learned a couple of secrets behind these sought-after eggs. Most importantly, the eggs come from well-cared-for hens. I saw chickens roaming freely through the poultry house and dining on soy-free, non-GMO feed. In warmer weather, the house's computer-controlled curtains are raised, opening the building to fresh air and sunshine. From March to October, older hens live out in the pasture and lay earthy, grassy flavored eggs reflective of the terroir.

Another reason for Highspire's stellar quality is that eggs are only a few days old when Deb delivers them to restaurant kitchens. And they don't have to travel far: Deb makes a 60-mile round trip every Tuesday, ensuring eggs arrive fresh with a minimum of bouncing around.

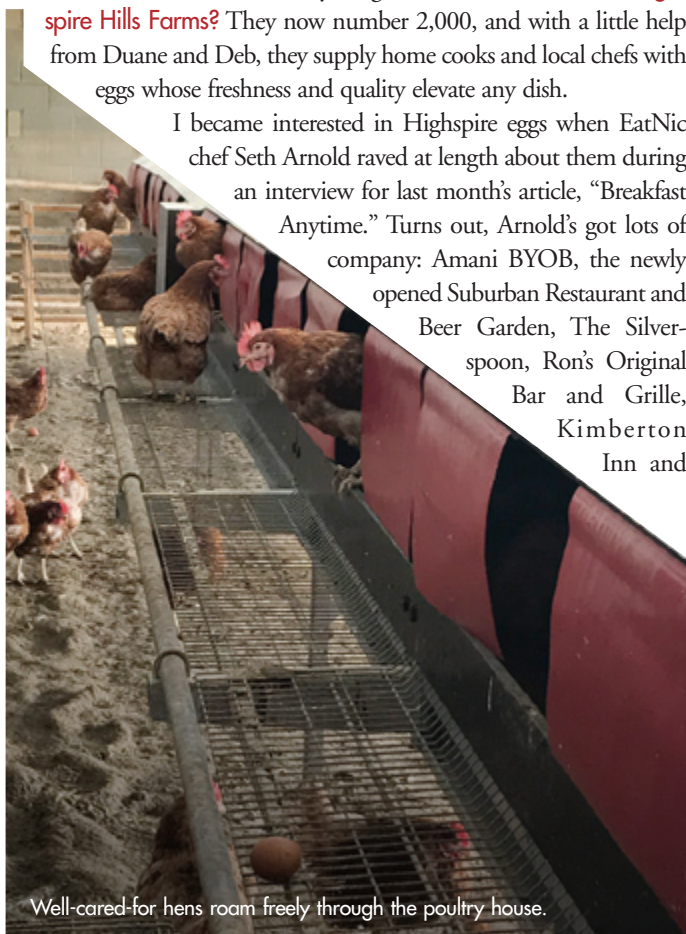
Home cooks in search of Highspire eggs can purchase them at Kimberton Whole Foods or at the farm. (The farm has the extra attraction of 4 alpacas, 7 fainting goats and a goose named Lola, a story for a future article.)

Inside the poultry house, there's a small room off the egg sorting area where refrigerators hold crates of brown eggs in large, extra large and jumbo sizes. Payment is by the honor system—just leave your money in the small basket on the bookshelf.

And if you happen to run into Duane or Deb, by all means, ask them your egg questions. Besides sharing their family egg recipes, they gave me a mini-course on chickens and eggs (see sidebar). Short of answering which came first, this down-to-earth couple will happily share what they know about the protein at the center of your plate.



Payment by the honor system



Well-cared-for hens roam freely through the poultry house.



Categories are determined by weight. Older hens lay fewer, but bigger, paler eggs.

Bacon Cheddar Quiche

Deb Ellis learned to make the pie crust for this quiche from her mother, Marge, who was a terrific pie maker.



For the crust:

2 C. flour
1 scant tsp. salt
 $\frac{2}{3}$ C. shortening (Crisco or other)
Up to 6 Tb. ice water

For the filling:

12 eggs
2 C. half and half
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. garlic powder
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. onion powder
Salt and pepper, optional
16 slices bacon, cooked crisp and crumbled
2 C. shredded cheddar cheese
 $\frac{1}{2}$ C. grated Parmesan cheese
2 Tb. chopped onion, optional

To make the crust:

Mix flour, salt and shortening by hand with a serving fork. Add water 1 Tb. at a time, just until the mixture becomes crumbly. Push together to make a ball. Split ball in half.

On a floured surface, roll each ball and flatten to $\frac{1}{8}$ " thickness.

To make the filling and assemble:

Preheat oven to 350°. With a mixer, mix eggs, half and half, garlic powder, onion powder, salt and pepper until fluffy. Place a crust in each of two pie plates. Layer bacon, cheeses and onion on top of crust. Pour in egg mixture.

Bake for 50 minutes to 1 hour, until a knife inserted into the center of the quiche comes out clean.

Makes 2 quiches, about 8–12 servings.

Fun Facts for Aspiring Eggheads

After raising chickens for 25 years, Duane Rehmeier and Deb Ellis are, ahem, eggheads. In the few hours I spent with them, they schooled me in some basic chicken and egg facts and referred me to *All About Eggs*, Lucky Peach's recipe-packed guide to the history and mystery of the protein eaten around the world. Tuck away the tidbits below so the next time you're around the table with friends, wow them with your eggs-pertise.

- A hen starts producing eggs when she's between 4 and 6 months old. She can produce an egg every 25 hours.
- Older hens lay fewer eggs, but those eggs are bigger and paler.
- Egg categories are determined by weight, not size. Large eggs weigh 2–2.24 oz., extra large 2.25–2.49, while jumbos tip the scale at a whopping 2.5+ oz.!
- Older eggs (1–2 weeks old) make the best deviled eggs because they have bigger air pockets, making them easier to peel.
- Americans refrigerate eggs while Europeans do not. Why? The simple answer is that U.S. eggs are washed before being sold while European eggs are not. Washing damages the egg's cuticle (also called "bloom"), which is the thin coating that naturally prevents water loss and blocks bacteria. Without its cuticle, the egg needs the refrigerator's protection.

45° is the ideal storage temperature for eggs in the U.S. Don't store them on the refrigerator door where they're subject to temperature fluctuations and lots of jiggling.



Veggie Patties

This recipe was passed down to Deb Ellis from her Aunt Cappie who, as a Seventh Day Adventist, avoided eating meat. Deb says the nuts and eggs give the patties a meaty flavor, so the dish will satisfy carnivores, too.



1 sleeve Saltine crackers
 ¼ lb. shredded cheese, any kind
 1 large onion, minced
 8 eggs, beaten
 ½ C. finely ground walnuts or pecans
 Garlic powder, to taste
 Dried sage, to taste
 Salt and pepper, optional
 1–2 Tb. peanut oil
 1, 11.5-oz. can tomato juice

Smash the saltines with a rolling pin until they become crumbs, but not powder.

In a large bowl, mix all ingredients except oil and tomato juice together and form into 20 patties (about 3" in diameter). Heat oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat.

Working in batches if necessary, brown patties on both sides. Patties burn easily, so keep a close eye on them. Keep finished patties warm in oven.

When all are browned, add tomato juice to the skillet and simmer with patties for 30–45 minutes. When ready to serve, carefully take them out and put on a serving dish or platter. Then, have the extra sauce on the side if folks want more.

Makes 20 patties.

Deb's Deviled Eggs



Older eggs are easier to peel because they have a larger air pocket. Deb likes to use eggs that are one week old.

12 large eggs
 ½–1 C. ranch dressing
 1 Tb. Dijon mustard
 ⅓ C. crispy, finely chopped bacon
 1 Tb. dill pickle juice
 ¼ C. shredded cheddar cheese

Bring a large saucepan of water to a rolling boil. Using a large spoon, place eggs in water one by one. Boil for 15 minutes, keeping

the heat the same. Drain and add cold water to saucepan.

Let eggs sit in cold water for 1 hour. Drain and put in refrigerator for 24 hours. Peel under running water.

Cut in half. Remove yolks and mix yolks with all other ingredients. Place mixture in whites.

Makes 24 deviled eggs.

Avgolemono

In her cookbook My Kitchen Year, Ruth Reichl has a recipe for this Greek lemon and egg soup. After making it many times, I decided that I'd like it to be hearty enough for a main dish. The shredded poached chicken does the trick.



7 C. chicken broth
 1 lb. bone-in, skin on, chicken breast
 ½ C. rice
 1 large lemon
 4 egg yolks
 Pinch of salt

In a large pot, bring chicken broth to a boil. Add chicken breast skin side down. Cover and reduce heat to medium-low. Simmer for 20–25 minutes until nearly cooked through. Turn heat off and let chicken sit in broth to finish cooking, about 15 minutes. Remove chicken from pot and when cool enough to touch, shred it. Set aside.

Bring broth back to a boil. Add rice. Reduce heat and simmer uncovered until rice is tender, about 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, finely grate the rind of a large lemon, squeeze the juice from it and mix zest and juice together in a bowl. Whisk in the egg yolks and a pinch of salt.

Once the rice is tender, mix a ladleful of the hot broth into the eggs. Slowly add egg-broth mixture back into pot and cook on low for a few minutes. Add shredded chicken and cook for a few minutes more.

Makes 6–8 servings.

Popovers

As I've learned from Ina Garten, popovers turn any meal into a celebration. But because I can be a lazier cook than Ina, I've eliminated a couple of her steps. To wit: I do not sift the flour, and because I use a really sturdy, non-



stick popover pan by Nordicware, I sometimes skip buttering the pan before I heat it. Having ingredients at room temperature is absolutely essential, as is NOT opening the oven while the popovers bake.

1½ Tb. butter, melted, plus more for greasing

the pans (see headnote)

1½ C. all-purpose flour

³/₄ tsp. kosher salt

3 extra-large eggs, room temperature

1½ C. whole milk, room temperature

Preheat oven to 425°. Whisk all ingredients together by hand or in a blender. Grease pans with butter (or don't). Place pans in oven for 2 minutes.

Fill each popover pan just under the halfway mark. Because every popover pan is slightly different, you might not have enough batter to fill every well. Add water to the ones that are empty to prevent them from burning.

Bake for 25 minutes. Look through the oven window to see whether pop-

overs look golden brown and puffed on top. If not, bake for 5 minutes more. Serve immediately.

Makes 10–12 popovers. ♦

Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother's Betty Crocker's Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 700+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.



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