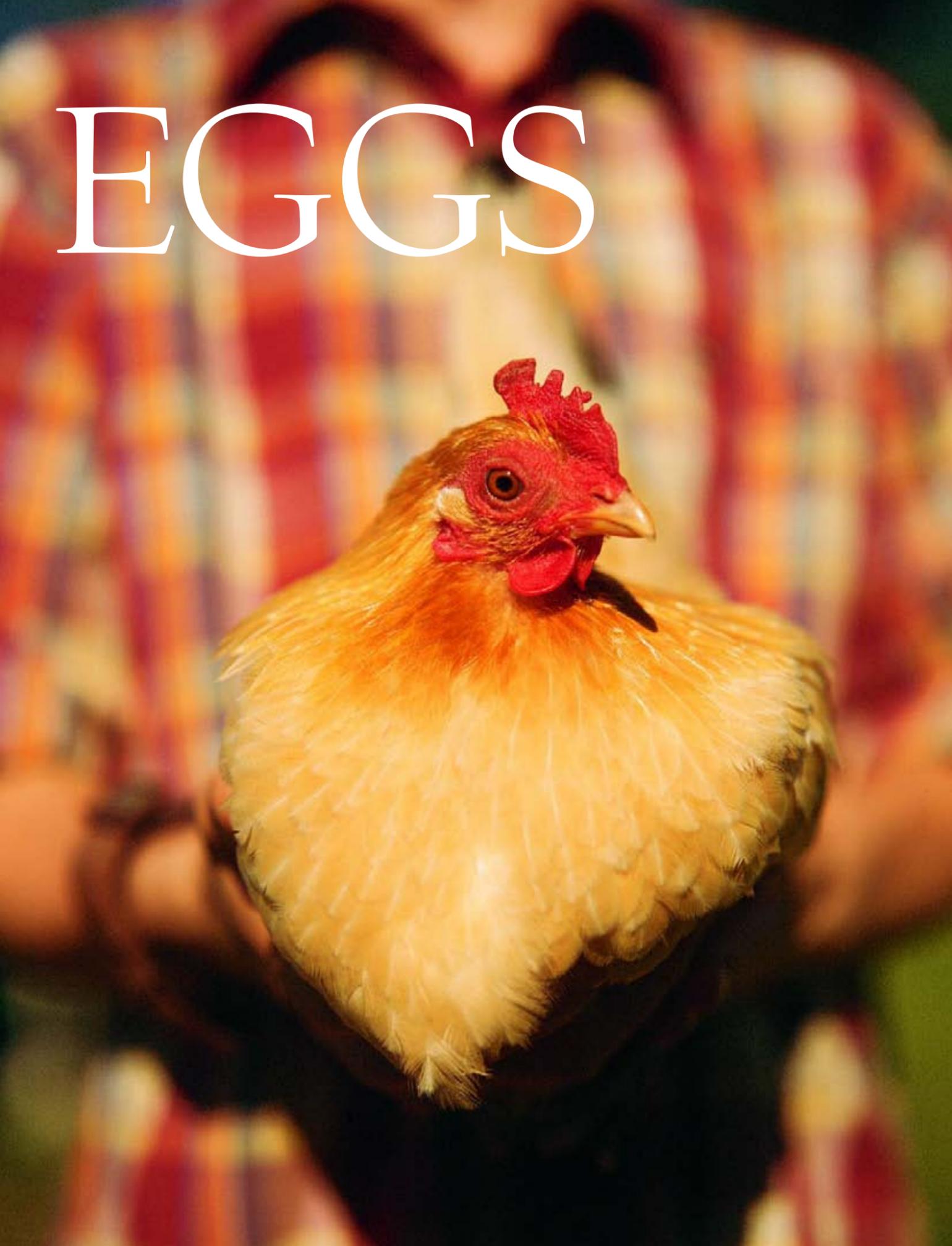


ODE TO

EGGS

TEXT BY **EMILY BETZ TYRA**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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Fresh eggs are nature's perfectly executed nourishment. And as an ingredient, they're amazingly versatile, delicious fried sunnyside-up, whisked into a custard or whipped into meringue. We head to a small farm west of Lake Leelanau in search and in awe of those beautiful little ovals.





Down by the swamp off Duck Lake Road, in the former Belanger farmstead, Loretta Helwig and Dwight Clapp are raising two young boys to be men. Aaron Helwig, 12, and his brother Kyle, 14, are 4-H members who raise pigs and lambs to take to the Northwestern Michigan Fair. They already know a bit about hard work and loss and being depended on. They also know how to take care of chickens.

It's a cold Friday evening before a school basketball game, and the whole family walks over to the wood-and-stone coop in the backyard, the original chicken house on their 113-year-old farm. Dwight swings open the door to reveal a rush of warmth, one hen busy laying, and a motley brood of 14 others promenading in the sweet straw on the floor and talking to each other with peaceful clucks. There are a few black australorps, a couple of black leghorn bantams, but most are Isa browns. "They're just the friendliest chickens," Dwight says, while finding the egg in the straw and placing them in a clean Electrasol dishwashing detergent bucket. Friendly for the most part. Aaron points out his show chicken, Chicken Little, a pretty little thing perched above the rest of the chickens on a roost. She's a two-time champion at the fair and has a life lease at the Helwig house, Loretta says, but the other chickens don't care about her ribbons. She's low on the chicken pecking order, and so stays apart from the rest to avoid getting bullied.

Aaron picks up his prized bird, turns her over and shows me how to tell if a chicken is actively laying, by placing a couple fingers in the soft space between her pubic bones—when the bones are opened up like that, it creates the passage for the egg. Both boys eagerly dispense more egg wisdom: Good layers produce an egg per day. The color of a hen's earlobes reveals the color of egg she'll lay. Generally, hens with white earlobes make white eggs, while hens with red earlobes make brown eggs. Hens that don't lay get the ax. Kyle and Aaron clearly understand the life cycle. They are part of it. On the farm there is no question which came first—this is food, and this is where it comes from.

Today snow still covers the ground, so the chickens only peek their beaks outside their saunalike hut. The first melt of April, Loretta says, they'll all be out in the farmyard. The family's little black dog, Peachy, noses her head into the coop. She gets along famously with the chickens themselves but has been known, as Loretta says, to "suck some eggs." But the wildlife that creeps up from the swamp is more worrisome. The boys tell about occasionally finding feathers and blood in the yard and rattle off the names of the predators they've seen take their chickens: weasels, foxes, raptors, coyotes, a particular bobcat that will crouch in the yard and wait for hens. Luckily, the chickens do have some sense of self-preservation; Kyle says any time a hawk appears in the sky they'll scatter and hide in the tall grass, and for a couple of hours he can't find them at all.

Back inside the farmhouse, Dwight gives the eggs a good rinse. Thick egg noodles Loretta made yesterday are drying on the counter. She flips right to the recipe in *Betty Crocker* to show how simple it is and says they're great with beef stroganoff or tossed into chicken soup.

Dwight only indulges in about two bacon-and-egg breakfasts a week anymore, but he talks about eggs the way some people rhapsodize about their favorite cake. "When you fry these eggs the whites stay up, not spreading thin all over the pan. Then there's the dark orange yolk on top, just like the rising sun. They taste so good." Loretta agrees. And so does their neighbor Tom Schaub, who takes all the eggs they can't use. He's in his 70's and only knows farm fresh, and he's not going to start buying store-shelved now. Loretta says it can be up to five weeks after an egg is laid that you finally consume a conventional grocery-store egg, which can be tasteless or even bitter.

But not the eggs Dwight has in his bucket. These are lovely and mellow. They'll make fine fried egg sandwiches on wheat toast sliced from the loaf. Huevos rancheros with a side of spicy beans. The yolks can make ice cream and custard and a glorious hollandaise. The whites will give a shiny glaze to the braid of a big eggy challah and make a mountain of meringue to top a lemon pie. I pull away from the red farmhouse, two dozen impeccably fresh eggs in my backseat, each filled with possibility.

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EASTER ON THE FARM

TOP: A basket of eggs to hard-boil and dye for the big Easter celebration on the farm, when all 40 of Loretta Helwig's family members will gather. Plates of deviled eggs are on the menu with venison tenderloin on the grill.

ABOVE: Brothers Kyle and Aaron Helwig. Aaron (RIGHT) holds Chicken Little, his ribbon-winning black-tailed buff Japanese bantam.



Lavender Crème Brûlée



Almond Meringues



Asparagus-Leek Bread Pudding



Greens with Hard-boiled Eggs and Prosciutto

Almond Meringues

- 4 large egg whites
- ¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- ¾ cup powdered sugar
- 1 teaspoon almond extract

These melt-in-your-mouth meringues taste like perfectly toasted marshmallows with the subtle hint of almond extract.

Preheat oven to 225°F. Line two large baking sheets with parchment paper.

Place egg whites and cream of tartar in a large bowl and beat with mixer until soft peaks form. Increase speed to high and add granulated sugar, then powdered sugar 1 tablespoon at a time until stiff peaks form. Add almond extract and beat just until blended. Drop 36 mounds onto the baking sheets lined with parchment, then place one almond slice on top of each meringue. Bake at 225°F for 1½ hours. Turn oven off and cool meringues in closed oven for 2 hours. Makes 3 dozen.

Lavender Crème Brûlée

- 8 lavender flower stems, fresh or dried
- 2½ cups heavy whipping cream
- 8 egg yolks
- ¼ cup sugar
- 3 tablespoons superfine or confectioner's sugar

Delicate lavender infuses this classic custard dessert.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Pull lavender flowers off their stems and place in a saucepan with the cream. Slowly bring the cream almost to a boil. Remove from heat and let stand to allow the lavender to infuse the cream.

Use a whisk to mix the egg yolks and sugar in a bowl. Reheat the cream, then gradually mix it into the yolk-sugar mixture, stirring continuously. Place 6 heatproof ramekins in a baking pan and strain the custard into the dishes. Carefully pour water around the ramekins to make a water bath and bake at 350°F for 20 to 25 minutes, until the custards are set. Transfer cooled dishes to the refrigerator and let chill for 3 hours. Before serving, sprinkle the custards with sugar and caramelize with a butane torch. Serves 6.

egg WISDOM



DID YOU KNOW?

It takes a hen 24 to 26 hours to produce a single egg. 30 minutes after she lays it, she starts all over again.

A RECIPE FROM TRAVERSE, NORTHERN MICHIGAN'S MAGAZINE
"ODE TO EGGS," APRIL 2006

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Greens with Hard-boiled Eggs and Prosciutto

- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon leaves
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- Pinch sea salt
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ pound mixed greens
- 4 hard-boiled eggs, peeled and sliced
- ½ cup prosciutto, sliced and crisped in a pan with olive oil
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Snipped fresh chives for garnish

This salad tastes fantastic with a poached egg on top, too. Feel free to substitute extra-crisp bacon or rendered bits of pancetta for the prosciutto.

In a small bowl, whisk together tarragon, Dijon mustard, sea salt, red wine vinegar, and olive oil. In a large bowl, toss the greens with enough of the dressing to coat them lightly. Divide the salad onto 4 plates and top with hard-boiled egg slices and prosciutto pieces. Add freshly ground pepper and chives to taste. Serves 4.

Asparagus-Leek Bread Pudding

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 small leeks, cleaned and sliced (white and light green parts only)
- 5 eggs
- 2½ cups milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 pound asparagus, cut into pieces
- 1 pound dry bread, cut into cubes
- ½ pound fontina cheese, shredded
- ⅛ cup fresh chives, chopped
- 1 tablespoon fresh tarragon, chopped
- ½ teaspoon grated lemon zest
- Pinch cayenne
- Pinch salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

This savory version of bread pudding is crusty brown on top, soft and fluffy inside and bursting with two of spring's first flavors.

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Melt the butter in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add the leeks and cook until tender. Set aside. In a large bowl, whisk together the eggs, milk and cream. Add the remaining ingredients and the leeks, and gently toss together. Spread the mixture into a 4-quart soufflé dish, or a 13-by-9-inch baking dish. Put the dish on a baking sheet and bake until the top is golden brown and a knife inserted in the middle comes out clean, 45 to 55 minutes. Cover bread pudding with foil if it browns too quickly. Serves 8.

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farm sources

Because of more nutrient-rich feed and stress-free living conditions, eggs fresh from small local farms can be much more flavorful than factory-farmed eggs. Keep your eyes peeled for hand-scrawled Eggs for Sale signs on the side of Northern Michigan's country roads, or, for a sure-bet source near your town, try Michigan Land Use Institute's fantastic farm finder, www.localdifference.org. It lets you seek out farms with your preferred farm-raising methods, such as free-range, grass-fed, antibiotic-free, and/or hormone-free.

A few places to fill your egg basket:
Compass Mountain Farms, Suttons Bay 4626 SOUTH CENTER HIGHWAY, 231-271-6481

Aspen Hill Farms, Boyne City 93 ANDERSON ROAD, 231-582-6790

Green Leaf Farms, Charlevoix 04998 LOEB ROAD, 231-547-4122

Kitchen Technique

Poaching Eggs

Use a deep saucepan—eggs poach best when the water is relatively deep. Adding vinegar to the water helps to set the whites.

Foolproof Hard-boiled Eggs

This is the way my mother taught me, and it works every time. Place eggs in a saucepan in one layer. Fill pan with water to 1 inch above eggs and heat on medium-high until the water begins to boil. Remove the saucepan from heat and cover with a lid. Leave the eggs in the water for 15 minutes, then immediately run cold water over the eggs. When cool to the touch, they are ready to peel.

Perfect Peaks

The fat in yolks prevents whites from fluffing, so make sure there is no egg yolk in your bowl when you start beating. To determine the stiffness of your egg white peaks, turn off the mixer and lift the beaters straight up. The whites will lop to one side for soft peaks and stand upright for stiff peaks.

Transporting Deviled Eggs

Here's a solution to a picnic-packing problem: Fill a pastry bag with egg yolk filling mixture, a plastic bag with hard-boiled white halves, and place both on ice. Fill the eggs on location.

Shell Removal

The easiest tool for removing any errant bit of eggshell from your bowl? Another piece of eggshell—just scoop and remove. 

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