



**TOP LEFT** Freshly laid eggs are collected daily at Petersham Nurseries. **RIGHT** Jacky gets to know a friendly cockerel. **BOTTOM LEFT** Cockerels tend to protect the egg-laying chickens, though it is not necessary to have one in order to produce eggs - and you should be aware of their penchant for regular early morning crowing.



# Eggs

Synonymous with Easter, eggs take centre stage this month, and you can't beat cooking with ones that have been freshly laid in your own garden

**PHOTOGRAPHS** MICHELLE GARRETT **WORDS** JACKY HOBBS



**K**eeping egg-laying chickens is becoming increasingly popular in both town and country. The quiet cluckings, louder crowings and clutches of lovely fresh eggs bring a certain amount of pleasure and routine satisfaction. While the rewards of owning chickens are great, keeping any animal requires total commitment and proper equipment. Before you rush out to buy chickens, take a moment to consider what it involves. You need to provide appropriately sized lodgings for your hens, as well as facilities for feeding, drinking and egg laying. You also need enough space for scratching. Security from predators, largely foxes, is also something that should be taken into account.

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Then there is the question of which breed of hen and how many? This really depends on how much space you have in your garden and whether you're after good-looking birds, attractive eggs or simply the most plentiful supply: you may be able to combine all three. There are many popular friendly varieties, including Marans, with delicious, deep chocolate-brown coloured eggs; Cotswold Legbars, which are prolific layers (more than 200 eggs in their first year) and famed for ▶

Expert Advice

CHEF SKYE GYNGELL ON MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR ORGANIC EGGS

- **Organic and free-range eggs** taste better and, philosophically, I believe you do not get the best out of food or an ingredient if you have not shown it respect in its life.
- **Keeping chickens** provides you with fresh eggs, and it is good for the environment as hens eat leftover foods. They also deposit organic matter in the garden.
- **Freshly laid eggs taste the best**, are brilliant for making cakes, rise, and fabulous in mayonnaise and other sauces. Shop-bought eggs may be up to six weeks old. Test for freshness by cracking an egg onto a saucer: if it is good, rounded and globular, with bounce, then it's fresh. If it's flat and weepy, then I'm afraid it's old hat.
- **Egg-based sauces** can make a meal. Top of my list are Caesar dressing and mayonnaise. When making emulsified sauces, the trick is patience. Add oil or butter to fresh eggs drip by drip. If your sauce curdles, whisk another egg yolk and drip it into the mix.



ABOVE Skye Gyngell, formerly head chef of Petersham Nurseries Café, where she used more than 400 fresh organic eggs per week. BELOW LEFT The eggs that are laid by the chickens at Petersham House are used in the kitchen of the main house.

their beautiful large-yolked eggs with pastel-blue shells; and Silkies, which have floppy, fur-like plumage and lay small tasty eggs.

Don't choose hens on looks alone. It is a good idea to buy your hens locally, perhaps selecting a breed local to your area, and take advice on care requirements from the breeder or supplier. Whatever the breed, if it is eggs that you are after, then you want young hens at point of lay, meaning they are about 16-20 weeks old and ready to start laying. You don't need a cockerel to produce eggs, although they are pretty good at protecting your clutch. Hens naturally lay eggs from spring until autumn, some say waxing and waning with the cycle of the moon, with more limited winter production.

Omlet, an online company that specialises in everything to do with keeping chickens, stocks funky hen houses in a variety of colours. It also has details of chicken-keeping courses around the country, which is a good idea if you are a novice. You could also buy ex-battery hens - a nice idea, but be aware that their best laying days will be over.

Feed chickens with a mix of proprietary chicken feed as well as recycling any household leftovers: vegetables, pasta, bread, polenta and salad. They also need grit to help with digestion, and a source of calcium, such as ground sea shells, in order to make strong egg shells.

During the day, your hens will happily roam the garden. They may dig and eat a few things you prefer that they didn't, so fence off any areas that you wish to protect. Generally, they're pretty garden friendly, spending much time scratching in the dirt, perhaps uncovering the odd worm. They give back to the garden, too - what better manure than fresh chicken droppings? This is usually deposited from roosting perches, mostly at night, so you will need to accumulate it during your regular clean of the chicken house.

For all your efforts, your friendly garden residents will reward you with freshly laid eggs, one of the most versatile kitchen ingredients.

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For more information

CHICKENS & EQUIPMENT

- [www.keepingchickens.info](http://www.keepingchickens.info) for links to informative websites.
- [www.omlet.co.uk](http://www.omlet.co.uk) has funky, colourful chicken houses, plus details of suitable breeds choose for your garden and courses about chicken keeping at venues around the country.
- [www.poultry.allotment.org.uk](http://www.poultry.allotment.org.uk) has lots of information and advice on all aspects of chicken keeping and a list of specialist publications. You will also find courses that are listed by region.

EAT IN OR EAT OUT

- **Recipes in this feature** are from Skye Gyngell's acclaimed cookbook *How I Cook* (pictured right), £25, Quadrille Publishing.
- **Enjoy a meal** at Petersham Nurseries Café in Surrey, or take time to browse for plants and gifts for garden and home in the shop. The café now hosts a new 'guest chef' every 12 weeks, and is open for lunch Tuesday to Sunday. Petersham House Garden is open as part of the NGS on Sunday 6 May. Petersham Nurseries, Church Lane, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7AG. Tel: +44 (0)20 8940 5230. [www.petershamnurseries.com](http://www.petershamnurseries.com)



TOP LEFT Ribbons of pasta are created from home-made dough using a machine. LEFT Skye cooks pasta made from fresh eggs, which takes only about a minute to cook. It does, however, take a little longer to prepare. BELOW A simple but delicious sauce of sage, crème fraîche, Parmesan and lemon makes this a dish to remember.



Recipe 1  
Pasta with sage, crème fraîche, Parmesan and lemon

Serves 4

For the pasta

- 1 whole egg
- 250g Type '00' flour
- 6 egg yolks (might need more depending on consistency)
- Large pinch of salt

For the sauce

- Knob of butter for frying
- 12 fresh sage leaves
- 4 tbsp crème fraîche
- Zest of 3 lemons
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 2 handfuls grated Parmesan
- Sea salt and black pepper
- Extra lemon zest and Parmesan for sprinkling

You will need a pasta machine for this recipe.

- **Put whole egg**, flour and salt in food mixer on slow and add egg yolks, one by one, until the dough comes together.
- **Remove and knead** dough for five minutes.
- **Roll out through a pasta machine**, starting on the largest setting. Feed and refold through machine, reducing settings each time, until pasta sheets are silky smooth and the required thickness.
- **Attach pasta cutter** and feed the dough through to get required cut such as linguine or tagliatelle.
- **Dust with polenta** to prevent sticking, and cut into 30cm lengths.
- **To cook the pasta**, drop into boiling water for about one minute, depending on thickness.
- **To make the sauce**, put the knob of butter in a pan, heat and add the sage leaves.
- **While the pasta is cooking**, add the crème fraîche, lemon zest and juice, and Parmesan to the sage and butter sauce. Season with salt and pepper.
- **Drain pasta**, add to the sauce and mix. To serve, sprinkle on the extra Parmesan and lemon zest. ▶

### Recipe 2 Winter rhubarb ice cream

#### Serves 10

#### Ice cream base

- 450ml double cream
- 150ml whole milk
- 1 vanilla pod, split lengthways
- 6 organic free-range egg yolks
- 120g caster sugar

#### Rhubarb flavouring

- 1kg rhubarb
- 1 vanilla pod, split lengthways
- 180g caster sugar
- 250ml verjuice or water

#### You will need an ice cream maker for this recipe.

- **Pour the cream and milk** into a heavy-based pan and place over a low heat.
- **Scrape the vanilla seeds** from the pod and add both seeds and pod to the pan. Slowly bring almost to the boil, then remove from the heat and set aside for 15 minutes.
- **In a bowl**, whisk together the egg yolks and sugar until the mixture is pale and thick.
- **Gently reheat the creamy** milk and pour onto the egg-yolk mixture, stirring with the whisk as you do so. Return the custard to the saucepan and place over the lowest possible heat, stirring until it thickens.
- **Remove from heat**, pour into a bowl to cool.
- **Wash, trim and cut rhubarb** into 5cm chunks. Put in a pan with the other vanilla pod, sugar and verjuice or water.
- **Simmer gently for 10 minutes.** Remove the fruit and boil to reduce remaining liquid by half. Pour liquid over rhubarb and cool.
- **When all ingredients** have cooled, remove the vanilla pods and pour the custard ice cream base into an ice cream maker. Churn until thickened.
- **Just before it sets**, pour in the cooled rhubarb mix and churn for 10 minutes.
- **Serve just as it is**, to appreciate the flavour. ◆

