

QUESTIONS TO ASK A POULTRY FARMER

ASKING QUESTIONS is the best way to ensure that you're purchasing sustainably raised, healthy foods, and supporting sustainable farmers. Here are some questions to get you started.

HOW ARE YOUR CHICKENS RAISED? ON PASTURE, INDOORS, CONFINED? ARE THEY CAGED?

Studies show that the healthiest meat comes from animals raised on pasture, so you ideally want to find poultry that has been raised outdoors in a natural state. If you live in a cold part of the country, raising poultry outdoors may not be feasible year-round, so you want to find poultry raised humanely, even if the birds spend significant time indoors. The most important factors are the number of animals raised together, the size of the space they live in, and if they are provided with straw and other materials they would naturally have access to outdoors. There is no hard and fast rule for how many chickens should be in a given area, but most sustainable farming advocates maintain that hens need three to four feet per bird. Ask your farmer to describe the enclosure the hens are kept in, and how much room they have to move around. Don't rely on labels for your answers. Many egg cartons say "cage-free" or "free range," but those labels can apply to birds that are packed into a crowded building, with little or no access to the outdoors.

HOW MUCH TIME DO YOUR HENS SPEND OUTDOORS EACH DAY?

There's a big difference between an animal that is permitted access to outdoors for 10 minutes a day and one that spends 10 hours a day or its whole life, outdoors. Ideally, you are looking for an animal that spent a significant amount of time outdoors in the natural environment. In cold or very hot climates, it may not be possible to keep chickens entirely outdoors. Ideally, poultry should have continual access to both indoors and outdoors. The farmer should be able to explain to you why they raise the birds the way they do — you should feel comfortable with the explana-

tion if they are raising their animals sustainably.

ARE YOUR HENS FORCE MOLTED?

Molting is the process whereby a chicken replaces its old feathers with new ones — it's part of a hen's natural

reproductive cycle and happens each year, allowing the birds to cease production for a few weeks as new feathers grow in. Molting occurs as days grow shorter and is stimulated by any form of stress. After a molt, the hens' production increases to near-peak levels and the quality of the eggs is improved. With forced molting, hens are not given any food for 5 to 14 days, forcing all of them to molt simultaneously and over a very short time period. Forced molting is inhumane and unsustainable — hens that are forced molted have compromised immune systems and may be more susceptible to salmonella. You should avoid eggs from chickens that were raised this way.

WHAT ARE YOUR HENS FED?

Sustainably raised poultry eat grasses, greens, grains and insects, whereas factory farmed poultry may be fed bone, feathers, blood, other animal byproducts and manure, as well as grain, mineral and vitamin supplements, arsenic, enzymes, and antibiotics. If the farmer tells you that the feed was supplemented with anything, dig further to find out exactly what. Not all supplements are necessarily inhumane or unsustainable — for example, many sustainable farmers supplement healthy grain mixtures with flaxseed during the winter to boost levels of omega-3 fatty acids in the eggs. A sustainable farmer will be willing to tell you what supplements, if any, are used and why.

ARE YOUR HENS GIVEN ANTIBIOTICS?

In general, any animal continually given a low dose of antibiotics in order to promote growth and/or ward off disease is being raised on an unsustainable factory farm. Meat or eggs from these animals should be avoided. Some farmers, however, will give their animals antibiotics if they become sick (this is known as therapeutic use of antibiot-

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QUESTIONS TO ASK A POULTRY FARMER (CONT.)

ics). Ask your farmer to explain any antibiotic use. Most sustainable farmers who raise their laying hens on pasture never need to use antibiotics, but give your farmer the opportunity to explain his or her stance on antibiotic use, and make sure you feel comfortable with the response.

NOTE ON HORMONES

By law, hormones cannot be given to poultry. But birds can be fed growth enhancers and feed additives to make them grow faster. These additives are not considered hormones, but there is concern that they may affect human health. It is best to find farmers who do not feed their animals any hormones, growth enhancers or any type of synthetic feed additives. You may also want to ask if animal protein was part of their diet. Poultry can be fed animal protein on both sustainable and unsustainable farms. The concern is if any of the animal protein fed to poultry contained hormones.

If a chicken or turkey is fed beef or a beef byproduct, that beef could conceivably contain hormones — this is one way hormones are thought to get into the poultry supply. It is uncertain whether this type of hormone transmission is affecting human health.

NOTE: *Sustainable farmers are very open about how they raise their animals and grow their fruits and vegetables. Consider asking to visit their farms to see exactly how the animals are raised and how their produce is grown. Many farmers welcome visitors. If you purchase products from a company advertising that it distributes sustainably raised foods from family farmers and ranchers, ask for their written standards for their products. If they aren't willing to share these with you, you may want to think twice about buying from them.*

To learn more about sustainable local food, visit Sustainable Table at
www.sustainabletable.org

