Which Came First, Low-Cholesterol Egg Or Happier Chicken?

The Chicken, but Is the Egg Really Low in Cholesterol? Hot Issue in Pennsylvania

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NEW HOLLAND, Pa.—Feathers have been flying here ever since John Albright and George Weaver Jr. laid claim to a low-cholesterol egg.

Mr. Albright, a schoolteacher turned businessman, and Mr. Weaver, a Mennonite farmer, were fiddling around with feed formulas and henhouse lighting last spring, trying to get Mr. Weaver's hens to lay more eggs. They stumbled onto something too good to be true: Not only were they getting more eggs but, according to a laboratory in nearby Lancaster, their eggs had almost 25% less cholesterol than ordinary eggs.


John Albright

So they advertised and began selling to nearby grocery stores. Word spread through Pennsylvania and New Jersey—even overseas. The two men thought the sagging U.S. egg industry would be overjoyed.

Eggs, after all, have become villains in many American diets. The American Heart Association recommends a daily intake of no more than 300 milligrams of cholesterol, but the standard American egg, says the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has 275 milligrams all by itself. Americans now eat only 267 eggs per capita annually, a sharp decline from 405 per capita in 1945.

"Since we lost the breakfast crowd, we haven't figured out where the egg fits in," acknowledges John Hoffman, executive director of the Pennsylvania Poultry Federation. Laments Vernon Ross, an egg-marketing specialist for the state, "You talk to little kids in school about cholesterol, and the first thing they say is eggs. Somebody should pick on shrimp for a while."

No wonder, then, that Mr. Albright and Mr. Weaver expected to be hailed as heroes. Fat chance.

Other egg producers, you see, have been trying to create a low-cholesterol egg for a long time now and—except for finding that the eggs of high-producing hens have *slightly* less cholesterol than the eggs of other hens—haven't come up with anything. So they tend to assume that Mr. Albright and Mr. Weaver haven't succeeded, either, and that the low-cholesterol claim is nothing but a gimmick aimed at grabbing higher market share.

In fact, some big egg producers in Pennsylvania recently suggested that state regulators pull Mr. Weaver's eggs off store shelves. And the New Jersey Agriculture Department warned Mr. Weaver in a letter that he might be violating that state's egg-marketing law by false advertising. It issued the warning after Paul Griminger, a nutrition professor at Rutgers University, tested Mr. Weaver's eggs for New Jersey and wasn't impressed. "There's nothing to it," he says.


George Weaver Jr.

But Pennsylvania's Agriculture Department supports the Albright-Weaver claim. The state's test results show that the eggs

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consistently register only about 220 milligrams of cholesterol. Oregon's Agriculture Department, which was asked to referee the dispute, agrees with Pennsylvania, a development that confuses the Pennsylvania Poultry Federation's Mr. Hoffman. He had scoffed at the so-called low-cholesterol eggs in his newsletter, the Poultry Post, but Oregon's finding makes him wonder. He now seeks a full investigation.

Also supporting Mr. Albright and Mr. Weaver is Lancaster Laboratories Inc., the outfit that first tested their eggs—and found only 210 milligrams of cholesterol. So that makes the score 3-1 in the two men's favor, not counting several labs whose results were inconclusive. It may or may not be relevant that Mr. Grimminger, the New Jersey tester, got his eggs from a grocery store. The Lancaster and state of Pennsylvania testers got their eggs from the Weaver-farm. The Oregon department got its eggs from the Pennsylvania department.

The controversy began here on Mr. Weaver's family farm outside New Holland, a rural, predominantly Amish settlement about 60 miles west of Philadelphia. Mr. Weaver, 46 years old, is a ruddy-cheeked man who works in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt. He is one of nine children born here at Westfield Egg Farm. His father was born on the farm, too.

Compared with other producers—some have close to two million hens—Mr. Weaver has a small operation. He and his brother, Clarence, who has a nearby farm, manage 115,000 hens laying about 95,000 eggs a day. The eggs are gathered, washed and placed in cartons by young Amish and other Mennonite women who wear big woolly sweaters over their cotton dresses and traditional white coverings on the back of their heads.

A shy, devout man, Mr. Weaver isn't used to publicity. He answers a visitor's questions politely but concisely. His church recently chastised him for appearing in a local television news program about the eggs. Now he declines to be photographed.

"Mr. George Weaver is probably one of the most honest farmers in Pennsylvania," says John Scott, the chief of egg, fruit and vegetable inspection for the state. "He wouldn't put out something mislabeled for all the tea in China."

Mr. Weaver's partner, Mr. Albright, 44, is a tall, talkative sort. He runs a business in Lancaster called Environmental Systems Inc., which purifies ventilation and water for schools and offices and provides lighting equipment. The egg project was Mr. Albright's idea. He thought that hens, like people, would be calmer and perform better if they lived in a more healthful environment.

"The Creator put things in motion and did it beautifully. Then man came along and screwed things up," says Mr. Albright. "We used the Creator's techniques."

Mr. Weaver's henhouse, the size of a football field, doesn't exactly resemble the outdoors, nor does it smell very good. Inside, some 50,000 white hens cluck loudly and poke their heads out of small, individual wire cages, stacked three deep, to bob for grain in the troughs below.

The key to this "natural" environment is a full-spectrum lighting system invented by John Ott of Sarasota, Fla. It bathes the hens in fluorescent lights that more or less duplicate sunlight. In addition, the air in the henhouse is ionized, which makes the dust from feathers and feed settle quickly on the floor. The hens eat a secret grain formula and drink specially purified water. Mr. Albright refuses to disclose the recipes.

As proof that all this works, Mr. Albright notes the brightness of the hens' red combs. (A sick hen's comb would be a washed-out pink color.) He also points out the hens don't flap their wings trying to escape from their cages—not that the size of their cages permits much flapping. (Attempts to flee are a sure sign of tension.) "These girls are as calm as they can be," says Mr. Albright. "They're almost asleep compared to others."

But scientists don't embrace the claim that calmer, healthier hens will lay eggs that differ from those of any other hens. Nor have they made up their minds yet about the effectiveness of Mr. Ott's lights.

Researchers remain somewhat in the dark because Mr. Albright and Mr. Weaver are secretive about their exact methods. People who want to know the details must sign nondisclosure statements. Besides, cholesterol-testing methods vary, and so can the results.

Mr. Albright has applied for a patent for the entire "production system" and plans to franchise it to big producers at a one-time installation cost of about $1 a hen. Mr. Weaver shares profits on egg sales with Mr. Albright, and Mr. Ott is entitled to royalties on the lighting system.

Though skeptical about the low-cholesterol claim, the egg industry hasn't slammed the door shut. A giant producer who says he doesn't "believe a word of it" confesses he wired a new henhouse for Mr. Ott's special lighting system "just in case it should all be true."

But Mr. Grimminger of Rutgers doesn't think the issue merits further pursuit. When you make scrambled eggs, he recommends that you simply throw away some of the yolks. Or when you eat a poached or fried egg, he advises: "Cut out 25% of the yolk. You'll have the same result, and it's a lot simpler."