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## Pasture Perfect



Egg Innovations helps small farmers enter the poultry business

*By Shawndra Miller*

»There's something soul-satisfying about the sight of chickens strutting about on green grass under an open sky. As Egg Innovations' founder John Brunnquell puts it, "When you see animals out on pasture, it's bucolic."

The Warsaw-based Egg Innovations has more than pretty scenery going for it though, because giving layer hens fresh air and sunshine turns out to be great for production as well. Egg Innovations' eggs are produced on family farms in Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky and Ohio.

Each farm follows a prescriptive design and strict standard operating procedures to meet multiple certifications, including Certified Humane by Humane Farm Animal Care, USDA Organic and Non-GMO Project Verified. But the process of getting to this point, where the

most stringent of each certifying body's standards are adopted, was a long and winding route that began long ago.

Wisconsin native Brunnquell grew up on a small farm that included caged egg production, in keeping with common



John Brunnquell

practice. With full respect for his father and the established way of raising layers, he continued keeping layers in cages when he began his own farm operation. Then 20 years ago he found his way into a cage-free poultry barn.

"I said, 'No matter what they taught me, no matter what anyone says, you cannot tell me that these birds have a worse quality of life than in cages,'" he recalls. His journey into animal welfare had begun.

For a time, he took incremental steps in that direction, starting with removing all cages from the structures. He added perches and noticed that every single one of the birds perched at night. He installed a scratch area and then set up an outdoor space, opening doors to allow the birds their choice.

"Each time we took another step of animal welfare," he says, "the birds were healthier, lived longer and laid more eggs. After a while you have that 'aha' moment."

He went on to pursue his Ph.D. in avian ethology — also known as bird behavior — and to create a company devoted to putting the welfare of chickens, people and planet first.

As the first commercial company in the United States to go 100 percent cage-free, then 100 percent free range, Egg Innovations has become a leader in humane poultry husbandry. Now about 30 percent of its farm partners go beyond free range, allowing their Hyline and Centurion birds access to pasture 365 days a year.

“What we now understand is the good Lord designed each animal ... to have certain native behaviors,” he says, “and that animal’s just hard-wired to that behavior.” In the case of chickens, they naturally want to scratch, dust bathe, perch, nest, forage and socialize. Egg Innovations chicken farms are set up to encourage these activities because happy hens are productive hens.

“If we design a building that allows these behaviors,” says Brunnquell, “we see an amazing transformation in the animals’ behavior and performance.” His barns hold 20,000 chickens with designated areas for scratching and nesting, and of course the all-important outdoor access. The company takes a “cookie cutter approach” to building, eschewing remodels in favor of new construction to ensure all standards are met.

It’s a formula that seems to be working. One of Egg Innovations’ free-range producers set the national production record in 2015. The Wisconsin operation was first in the nation over all categories — caged, cage-free, free-range and pastured.

The distinction between free-range and pastured plays out like this: Free-range hens have seasonal access to the outdoors (when temperatures rise above 32 degrees). In practice, this means that the farmer opens the barn doors at 33 degrees throughout the winter. Outside, Egg Innovations’ free range hens typically have 22 square feet per bird in an 11-acre pasture. Some legacy barns are set in pastures that allow the minimum Certified

Humane requirement of 2 square feet per bird, but all new contracts allow for 22, according to Brunnquell.

Pastured hens, on the other hand, are allowed access to a 50-acre pasture 365 days a year “short of a tornado,” he explains. Farm partners with this setup are located in Kentucky, where winters are milder.

Though he still keeps his office on the Wisconsin homestead that his grandfather began farming in 1913, he finds Indiana to be a stronger poultry state for the company’s headquarters. With Purdue’s excellent ag program, Indiana offers a stellar pipeline for veterinarians and new young graduates. Of the 60 contract farmers across the Midwest, 40 are located in Indiana, ranging from Nappanee in the west to Fort Wayne in the east, and about 100 miles south of Fort Wayne near the state line.

A key reason for relocating to northern Indiana was the region’s large Amish population. Amish farmers are familiar with the contract production model of farming. Egg Innovations owns the feed mill and egg grading facility, and raises chicks to provide to its farms. While retaining ownership of the poultry, the company pays farmers to raise the chickens on their land.

“Our ideal farmer has no prior poultry knowledge,” he says. That way, they come into the contract with no bad habits or preconceived notions, and they’re more open to the training and inspections that go along with farming for Egg Innovations.

Brunnquell says his company has two passions – improving animal welfare and nurturing the next generation of farmers working medium-sized operations. “I had the luxury of founding this business to put those social values in the company,” he says. “We write the longest contracts and pay the highest rates in the industry.”

In keeping with the company's pledge to put the welfare of not only chickens, but people and planet first, its farmers make a sustainable income that can support a family on a small amount of acreage.

And the efficiency of streamlined processes and standardized barn designs helps the consumer as well — offering a choice of quality, ethically raised product at an affordable price. Egg Innovations' consumer brand, Blue Sky Family Farms, is available at Kroger and Marsh for about \$4 a dozen for free range, or \$5 a dozen for pastured eggs.

Egg Innovations bills itself as a family farm business, and that's what Brunnquell looks for in new contracts. "We want this to be a family enterprise," he says. "If you've got a big farm of 4,000 acres ... and you want to diversify, maybe you already have hogs, we're not too interested." He's more excited to sign young farmers just starting out on family farms. "What we find is that when it's a family operation, they pay more attention to the animals."

Lonnie Yoder's LaGrange-area farm involves the entire family in its Egg Innovations enterprise, which he started nine years ago. When his 10-year contract is up, he plans to renew. Having grown up on a chicken farm raising broilers, Yoder wanted his children to learn the responsibility that comes with caring for livestock. He and his wife's own brood numbers nine, ranging in age from 4 to 19.

All the children, including the preschoolers, take part in the enterprise. "They're out there helping," he says of the youngest children. "We hand pick all the eggs. They might gather a half case or so." It takes the family about 45 minutes, morning and evening, to complete the chores.

Egg Innovations provides the Yoders with steady income that isn't dependent on his woodworking employment. "If I get sick or

something and can't go to work," he says, "the income keeps going. The chicken farm's really what makes my payment and pays my taxes."

He also keeps five Angus beef cows, "but they're mostly just to keep the weeds down," he says, though he does make a little money selling their calves in the spring.

Yoder says the company differs from other setups in its concern for the chickens' welfare. For example, some operations switch the barn lights on as early as 1:30 a.m. to allow a 4 a.m. egg gathering schedule. But at Egg Innovations, "they don't want us to light them up early," he says. "They have us light them up at the same time as it gets light outside. They want the birds to live just as natural as we can get it."

And "natural" adds up to a product that many are willing to pay a premium for – whether they are concerned about animal welfare, GMOs, pesticides, or simply enjoy the flavor of eggs laid by pastured hens.

"Not everyone is focused on animal welfare," says Brunnquell, "but for those who are, we want to be there for them."

*For more information, visit [egginnovations.co](http://egginnovations.co) (<http://egginnovations.co>).*

Photos provided by Egg Innovations.



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