

# Cage-free egg farms peck away at consumer reality

I toured a couple of egg farms and changed my buying habits.

It started with a column I wrote a while back about factory farming. I questioned the morality of treating food animals like cogs in an industrial machine. Some farmers took issue.

Clint Hickman of Hickman's Family Farms took me on a tour of the egg farm his family runs near Buckeye.

I saw some of the 4 million hens Hickman's has in so-called battery cages. Animal-rights advocates find these cages so offensive they are trying to get voters in California to outlaw them.

Stacked one upon another, these cages rose high above me, and stretched in long rows.

**Linda Valdez**

Republic columnist



A group of chickens lays eggs in those cages for about two years. Then the birds are euthanized, and new chickens are brought in.

As I walked down one row, the birds at my level went nuts. They flapped and cackled wildly, filling the air with dust and feathers. The day-

light at the far end of the building grew dimmer. Alfred Hitchcock came to mind.

It is efficient, though. The cages are at a slight tilt so that the eggs roll onto a conveyor that collects them. Under each row of wire-bottomed cages is another conveyor belt onto which the chickens' manure falls and is periodically carried away. It gets composted and sold.

The chickens calmed down after I walked by. The dust and feathers settled quickly, too. The barn was clean. The birds looked healthy.

This wasn't Birdie Paradise, but it wasn't Avian Hell, either.

It wasn't nearly as bad as I expected.

Yet, these weren't the hens I like to imagine when I crack an egg into a pan.

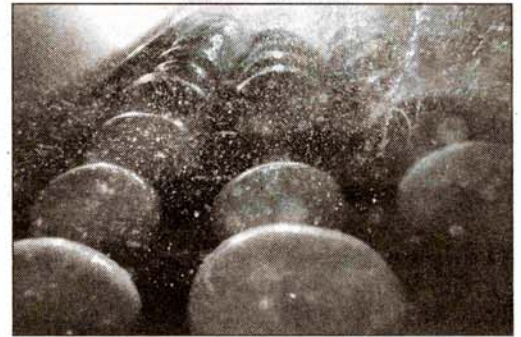
I wanted to see happier chickens. The next stop on my chicken tour was another family-owned egg operation. This one, Armstrong Egg Farms of Valley Center, Calif., supplies the cage-free eggs Hickman's sells in Arizona.

Here I saw hens, thousands of them, milling around freely in large sections of long barns. Layers of chicken excrement build up on the floor during the chickens' lives. After the flock is euthanized, the barn is cleaned and a new flock is brought in. Nest boxes are available, but some hens lay eggs on the floor, where they rest on the chicken poop until workers collect them.

Neither Hickman nor Ryan Armstrong, vice president of his family's farm, likes to eat the eggs produced in cage-free chicken houses. He says they take home eggs from the flocks of caged birds the farm also raises. "Those eggs roll out so much cleaner," he says.

Other things made me uncomfortable about cage-free chickens, too.

The older birds didn't have many feathers around their necks because they peck each



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Eggs roll along during a wash cycle at Hickman's Family Farms near Buckeye.

other in a constant struggle to establish status in a huge flock. By contrast, a small group of caged chickens soon establishes a pecking order and squabbles are fewer, Hickman says.

The cage-free flock has twice the mortality rate of his caged flock, Armstrong says. Broken bones are more common among the cage-free birds. If the flock gets spooked, they pile up on one another, crushing those at the bottom.

"People think by spending more money on cage-free eggs they are creating a better life for that chicken," Armstrong says.

I was one of those people. I've changed my mind.

After the second tour, Hickman asked what type of eggs I'd be buying in the future.

"I'll go to the farmers market," I said.

Aha, he replied, but those eggs are produced in completely unregulated conditions from chickens that may or may not be healthy. He said some farmers-market eggs were found to have been washed in detergent, which can permeate the shell.

OK. So I buy eggs from caged hens now. And I buy Hickman's eggs. They are locally produced, and I've seen the chickens.

I believe farm animals deserve a quality of life that reflects their status as sentient creatures. Although they are healthy and well cared for, I'm not sure the caged chickens I saw fully meet that standard. I am quite sure the cage-free birds didn't.

Consumer demand for cage-free eggs created something this consumer didn't really want. It happened, in part, because of the secrecy surrounding production of food animals. Hickman and Armstrong showed the courage to let me in, but few people get the chance to really look at what's going on and make a reasoned judgment. That has to change.

If more people looked inside today's barns, there would be a demand — based on reality — for changes that would ultimately result in better lives for farm animals and a better public image for farmers.

Reach the writer at [Linda.Valdez@ArizonaRepublic.com](mailto:Linda.Valdez@ArizonaRepublic.com).