

BUSINESS

Egg Ranches Give Customers a Break

By **KITTY MORSE**

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With Easter just around the corner, egg ranches in North County are gearing up for their busiest week of the year.

One popular destination for egg buyers is the San Pasqual Academy Egg Ranch, 3 miles east of the Wild Animal Park in the San Pasqual Valley.

The ranch, opened in the early 1950s, is part of a Seventh-day Adventists boarding high school. Here, dozens of cages set against an imposing background of boulder-strewn hills are home to more than 40,000 chickens.

“We’re one of the very few ranches which are strictly vegetarian in their methods of feeding chickens,” said ranch manager Glenn Lewis, who has held the position for more than 25 years.

Twice a day, students at the academy work in the ranch’s egg-grading room, sorting and packaging the fragile product.

The job requires clear vision and steady hands. After the eggs are set on a conveyor belt, they must go through the “candling” process, slowly rotating through an illuminated section of the belt. Each egg is examined by hand for spots, dirt, or cracks--those that don’t make the grade are discarded.

Small or slightly cracked ones go to commercial egg breakers, who in turn, sell them to the baking trade for use as egg whites or egg yolks.

After eggs have passed muster, student workers pick them up 12 at a time with the help of suction cups, and gently set them in individual egg cartons.

The eggs will reach their final destination within 24 hours.

The Ward Egg Ranch, home to more than 150,000 chickens, is nestled among the rolling hills of Harmony Grove in Escondido. The ranch, operated by Arie, Edward, and Bill Wilgenburg since the late '60s, supplies eggs to institutions such as the Price Club.

Under seemingly acres of sheds, long rows of caged chickens keep the air alive with cackles and clucks.

Freshly laid eggs roll down onto a rack, where they are gathered by hand several times a day. Cleaning, oiling (which acts as a preservative), candling, weighing, and packing the eggs is carried out on an intricate system of conveyor belts.

Although Ward Egg Ranch deals mainly in wholesale, it also sells directly from the ranch.

Closer to the center of Escondido is the Summit Egg Ranch, with 25,000 chickens. Like most other local ranchers, Ben Felt raises white Leghorns to keep his customers in fresh eggs. The ranch supplies hotels and restaurants in San Diego and Orange counties, and sells eggs year-round from an on-site country store.

If you are in the market for a more exotic Easter egg, you might consider one laid by an ostrich.

Phil and Margaret Sargent own the San Diego Ostrich Ranch, which straddles San Pasqual Road on the way to the Wild Animal Park.

Hollowed-out ostrich eggs and painted or beaded eggs line the shelves of the small gift shop that overlooks their unique property.

The ranch, which has been in business five years, serves as a stud farm for breeding ostriches.

Female ostriches lay their eggs in the evening between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., usually in the same spot--causing the Sargents to go on a daily egg-gathering expedition.

One fresh ostrich egg is equal to two dozen chicken eggs and tastes much like a chicken egg. "The yolk is lighter, creamier than a chicken's," Margaret said.

To soft boil an ostrich egg takes an hour; to hard boil it takes 1 1/2 hours.

The typical large chicken egg yolk contains 213 milligrams of cholesterol. Eggs keep for up to three or four weeks when refrigerated at 45 to 50F.

The fresher the egg, the harder it is to peel. Lewis of the San Pasqual Academy Egg Ranch recommends refrigerating eggs for a short period to make the process easier. A runny egg white indicates an old egg.

EGG RANCHES

San Pasqual Academy Egg Ranch, 17701 San Pasqual Valley Road, Escondido CA 92025. 745-8545. Look for the egg ranch sign, and turn left onto a dirt road. Open daily, except Saturday, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Large eggs, \$1 a dozen; extra large, \$1.10; jumbos, \$1.15.

Ward Egg Ranch, 2900 Harmony Grove Road, Escondido CA 92029. 745-5689. Open daily except Sunday and holidays. Monday to Friday: 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday: 7 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Call for prices.

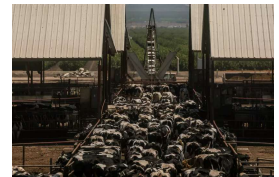
Summit Egg Ranch, 2052 Summit Drive, Escondido CA 92025. 746-1621. Open daily, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. except Wednesdays and Sundays. Saturdays 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Medium eggs, \$1 a dozen; large, \$1.10; extra large, \$1.20; jumbo, \$1.40.

San Diego Ostrich Ranch, on way to Wild Animal Park, on San Pasqual Valley Road. (619) 741-2546. Public invited daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Tuesdays. Fresh ostrich eggs: \$25 apiece (call for availability). Eggshell: \$12.

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