

Ingredient

Eggs

Every egg is a wonderful package of chemical properties and culinary possibilities, writes Tonia George. When treated with respect and understanding, it will pay great dividends

Photographs by Richard Jung. Food styling by Jacque Malouf. Styling by Tabitha Hawkins

IT'S A PECULIARLY ROMANTIC MOMENT, THE FIRST time you spot a perfectly speckled hen's egg nestled in a dark chicken coop. Still warm in your hands, it feels like a special gift you've been honoured with. The promise of a thousand dishes, ingeniously packaged into a small, self-contained shell.

Eggs are so versatile: they can enrich and thicken bearnaises, set nutmeg-laced custard tarts and emulsify voluptuous mayonnaises, as well as seal, stick and gloss all manner of foods. No other ingredient makes the cook feel so like an industrious little alchemist, transmuting the ordinary into the culinary equivalent of gold.

Much of an egg's mystery lies in its chemistry. When heated beyond its coagulation temperature, the bonded proteins in an egg squeeze out water, which makes it curdle, or go rubbery. So eggs need patience, gentle heat and must never be harshly boiled, only simmered. The most extraordinary chemical effect, though, is restricted to the egg's white, or albumen. Whisk egg whites and their volume can expand up to eight times, making them a receptacle for the most treasured of all ingredients: air. Whites trap air and produce a foam, which sets. This is what makes soufflés, mousses and meringues.

Oddly, an egg's flavour is tricky to describe. 'Eggy' is used as a tasting note in a host of other dishes, but it's impossible to precisely pinpoint that flavour, especially without referring to texture. There are hints of grassy meadows, corn or whatever the chicken has been scratching for, but it's the creamy richness and contrast of textures that we love the most. It's the heart of the egg, the golden, molten liquid that trickles onto your plate when you plunge a fork into it, that makes them so sumptuous. It's a neatly packaged sauce, ideal for steamed asparagus or buttered muffins. Even beaten as an omelette, eggs should have the oozing quality that the French evocatively call *baveuse*: 'drooling'.

A basic bit of egg maintenance is also worth knowing. Eggs should be stored away from strong odours, with their pointed ends downwards to protect their air sac. They behave better at room temperature, so, as long as you eat them up quickly, they never need to see the inside of a fridge. If your eggs don't have a best-before date, it's easy enough

to spot a fresh one. Just pop it into a bowl of water: one end will float if it's old; fresh ones will sink.

When choosing eggs, try to go for organic or free range – not only is this the responsible way to shop, but the eggs will taste richer. Waitrose breeds Columbian Blacktail hens, a robust variety that thrives in the British climate. Organic blacktails are fed on a natural cereal-based diet, free from artificial yolk colourants and antibiotic growth promoters. The birds are vaccinated against salmonella, and are free to roam during the day and housed safely at night. There are a variety of rarer, so-called 'speciality breeds', too. The beautiful, multicoloured Cotswold Legbar have a larger yolk than most eggs with a good, rich flavour, so are particularly good for baking, as are the flavoursome Burford Browns.

Like milk, seeds and nuts, eggs are designed to nurture life (they're packed full of protein and also contain niacin and vitamins A, D and B12), so it seems entirely natural that they make great comfort food. A crumpled omelette with a quivering centre or a soft-boiled egg and childishly sliced soldiers are the best form of solace after a hard day. On the other end of the scale, the egg is a great test of a restaurant. It's the simplest thing, and yet they get it wrong time and time again. Rubbery scrambled eggs and vinegary poached eggs are everywhere, but cooked properly, they're heaven. My favourite egg memory is of a meal in Italy, with a truffle-infused fried egg tossed at the table into fresh egg tagliatelle. Another egg epiphany came in the form of a dish called *oeufs en meurette*, in which eggs are poached in wine and covered in a red-wine reduction infused with shallots, lardons and herbs, thickened with butter and served on toasted brioche.

My final word is in defence of eggs. Although the advice still stands that if you are in fragile health or have a weak immune system you should avoid eating raw or lightly cooked eggs, the Lion Mark system ensures British hens have been vaccinated against salmonella, so there is very little risk. So stop worrying what eggs might do to you and spare a thought for the amount of eggs that are abused in kitchens up and down the country. Give them the patience they deserve and they will reward you with delicious eating experiences.

It's the golden liquid that trickles onto your plate that makes them so sumptuous



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Baghdad eggs with minty pitta crisps

There are many versions of the recipe for Baghdad (also known as ‘Turkish’) eggs. This one sits the eggs on cool Greek yogurt that has been spiked with garlic and drizzled with spicy, sizzling butter. Eat with these minty pitta crisps.

SERVES 2
PREPARATION TIME: 15 MINUTES
COOKING TIME: 5 MINUTES

- MINTY PITTA CRISPS
- 2 pitta breads
 - 1 tsp olive oil
 - 2 sprigs mint, leaves chopped
 - 1 red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped

- BAGHDAD EGGS
- 200g Greek yogurt
 - 1 small garlic clove, crushed
 - 4 medium eggs
 - 25g butter
 - ½ tsp hot paprika
 - a squeeze of lemon juice

Preheat the grill to high. Fill a deep frying pan with water and bring to the boil. Cut one edge of each pitta and prize each layer apart. Place the cut side up on a baking sheet. Mix the oil with the mint and chilli and spoon over the pitta. Place under the grill for 2–3 minutes until golden and crisp. Break up and scatter with salt. Mix the yogurt with the garlic and season with salt. Divide among two bowls.

Once the water in the frying pan is boiling, set the heat to low and wait until it is barely simmering again. Break four eggs into the pan so they keep apart. Cook for 3 minutes so the yolks are still soft. Lift each one out with a slotted spoon and drain the underside with kitchen paper. While the eggs are poaching, heat a frying pan over a high heat with the butter and paprika and cook until it starts to go slightly brown and nutty. Add the lemon juice, watching out as it will splutter. Place two eggs into each bowl of yogurt. Drizzle the butter over the egg and yogurt. Serve with the pieces of minty pitta crisps.

PER SERVING: 653 KCALS/43.6G FAT/16.6G SATURATED FAT/1.5G SALT/4.7G SUGARS

Wine A ripe Chardonnay has enough fruit sweetness to not be overawed by cream and egg protein. This one has a pleasant herbal undertone that will cope with the mint pittas. **Herrick Chardonnay 2003 Vin de Pays d’Oc, France. Bin 83612; £5.29.**

Deep-fried eggs with golden garlic, chilli and oyster sauce

Deep-fried eggs are really popular in Asia. While we love our fried eggs with brown sauce, Chinese people half way round the globe eat their fried eggs with another thick, brown condiment – oyster sauce. Done well, these eggs should come out with a really crispy white and a runny, golden yolk. This recipe is a modified version of one by the fabulous Australian-Chinese chef Kylie Kwong.

SERVES 2
PREPARATION TIME: 15 MINUTES
COOKING TIME: 2 MINUTES

- 400ml groundnut or vegetable oil
- 4 large eggs
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced thinly
- 3 tbsp oyster sauce
- 3 salad onions, finely sliced
- 1 red chilli, deseeded and diagonally sliced
- a few sprigs of fresh coriander
- a good pinch of ground white pepper

Heat the oil in a wok or saucepan for 2–3 minutes, over a medium heat, until fairly hot. The oil’s surface will begin to shimmer and move when it is hot enough. Add the garlic and cook for 30 seconds until lightly golden, then remove with a slotted spoon and drain on kitchen paper.

Crack the eggs into a bowl and slip them into the hot oil. Stand back, they will bubble up and crackle. Turn the heat down immediately and cook for 2 minutes until crisp underneath. You want the yolks to remain runny, so don’t overcook them. Remove the eggs from the pan with a large fish slice and place on a plate covered with kitchen paper to drain off the oil.

Serve the eggs on a warm platter. Drizzle over the oyster sauce, scatter with the golden garlic, salad onions, chilli, coriander and give them a shake of white pepper. Divide the eggs with a fork and serve on noodles or rice.

PER SERVING: 527 KCALS/25.8G FAT/7.1G SATURATED FAT/2.9G SALT/1.9G SUGARS

Wine A spicy, full-bodied Champagne is a remarkably good match with this dish, because of its cleansing acidity and well-masked hint of sweetness. **Waitrose Blanc de Blancs Non-Vintage Champagne. Bin 83818; £18.99.**



Ingredient



Twice-baked goat’s cheese, courgette and tomato soufflés

You may not expect it, but these savoury treats have all the lightness of a regular soufflé. Better yet, they can be made ahead of time and heated up with cream the next day.

SERVES 6
PREPARATION TIME: 30 MINUTES
COOKING TIME: 30 MINUTES

- 65g butter, plus extra for buttering the dishes
- 2 medium courgettes, grated
- 50g plain flour
- 300ml whole milk
- 3 eggs, separated
- 50g sun-dried tomatoes, chopped and drained
- 100g firm goat’s cheese such as Tomme de Chèvre, grated
- ¼ tsp English mustard powder
- 50g crumbly soft goat’s cheese
- 200ml single cream

Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas 4. Prepare a bain marie by placing a roasting pan one-third-full of warm water into the oven. Butter 6 ramekins or ovenproof dishes. Heat 15g butter in a frying pan and fry the courgettes for 3–4 minutes, then drain and pat dry. Heat the remaining butter in a saucepan; once it has melted, stir in the flour. Add the milk, gradually mixing it in until smooth. Bring to the boil; simmer for a few minutes until thick. Cool. Meanwhile, put the egg whites into a bowl and whisk until just stiff. Beat the yolks, courgettes, tomatoes and ⅓ of the firm goat’s cheese into the pan. Season with mustard powder, salt and pepper and crumble in the soft goat’s cheese. Fold in the whites. Spoon the mixture into the ramekins, almost to the top. Place in the bain marie. Cook for 18–20 minutes till set. Allow to cool and sink. When you are ready to serve, preheat the oven to 200°C/gas 6. Run a knife around the edges of the soufflés and invert them onto a baking dish. Pour over the cream and scatter with the remaining cheese. Return them to the oven for 10 minutes until crisp. Serve with a green salad.

PER SERVING: 390 KCALS/31.0G FAT/18.0G SATURATED FAT/1.0G SALT/4.8G SUGARS

Wine Goat’s cheese needs a ripe, fragrant Sauvignon Blanc. The latest Loire vintage is a cracker. **Pouilly Fumé 2004 Masson Blondelet, Loire, France. Bin 59606; £9.99.**