

What Are Heirloom Eggs?

We turned to Pete & Gerry's Eggs to find out more about these lovely, colored eggs

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Though typically the bounty of farmers markets, the "exotically" colored eggs, which come in beautiful colors from pastel blues to olive greens and chocolate-reds, are no longer such a rarity to find thanks to a family-run operation named **Pete & Gerry's**.

You've most likely seen their organic eggs at Whole Foods or other grocery stores, which are great in their own right, but what really sets this company apart is their sale of heirloom eggs. Sold at specialty markets, including New York City's Eataly, which uses the eggs to make fresh pasta, the eggs are produced by a third-generation family egg farm that now has expanded to include a network of more than 30 small family operations throughout New Hampshire and Maine.

Recently, our editorial team was lucky enough to receive eggs from both the **Ameraucana and Marans hens**, to create the recipes below, and was struck by the stunning color of the shells and yolks. As Ken Zuckerman, event and promotion manager at Pete & Gerry's, mentioned, it's actually a good sign that the colors of the eggshells range from pastel blue to olive green (for the Ameraucanas) and in the shades of brown-red for the Marans (see photo above). Because these hens are from heirloom breeds and are raised and fed in small flocks in spacious hen-houses with room to do pretty much whatever they want, their eggs don't have the consistency and standardization found in most commercial eggs.

As Jesse Laflamme, son of Gerry and cousin of Pete, explains, the majority of eggs produced in this country, including organics like theirs, are produced by one of six breeds of hens that are all very similar. "White or brown, these hens have been selectively bred for generations to achieve a single goal: producing more eggs while eating less chicken feed!" While he mentions that selective breeding is a worthwhile and notable goal because eggs are produced at a lower cost, in his opinion, this means means that we've lost some of the unique flavor characteristics that other breeds have to offer by just focusing on productivity.

Case in point, the heirloom hens that they breed for eggs. The first and most obvious difference that we saw was the vibrant color of the yolks. A deep, golden orange, the yolks are richer in flavor and larger than those of both organic and conventional eggs.

Why? Laflamme explains that one component which contributes to flavor is their diet. These hens have plenty of access to greens, alfalfa in particular, and this helps to darken the yolk and increase the flavor — but the diet isn't actually all that different from what the organic hens eat. What it really comes down to is the breed and how they process their diet to make these high-quality and unbelievably delicious eggs. The Ameraucana hens come from indigenous Patagonia and the Marans hens are similar to their 12th-century French ancestors, which allow them to have unique characteristics that are uncommon in conventional eggs today. Laflamme also notes that the shell quality and thickness were critical to survival then (the other thing our editors noticed was the durability of the shells when cracking them open), which is not a trait needed for conventional hens who produce large amounts of eggs in a controlled environment.

The difference in taste between the two is very slim, with the Ameraucana eggs having a slightly larger yolk so the flavor is a little stronger, but what's very different is the striking colors of the shells. Where does the color come from? Laflamme explains that the color is entirely genetic and the egg is only given color in the last five hours (out of 26 to 30) that it takes for a hen to produce an egg. In more scientific terms, he says, "The color is actually produced from the transformation and utilization of hemoglobin by the egg." Cool, right?