

Interview with an Egg Farmer

In this interview we hear from Josh and Tamsyn Murray of Josh's Rainbow Eggs. Josh is 13 years old, is responsible for about 2000 chickens and has built a business selling the eggs.

Josh explains why free-range and organic eggs taste better. Josh and Tamsyn, his mum, discuss how a family egg farm works, including how eggs are sorted and packed.

Could you introduce yourself?

I'm Josh, and I'm from Josh's Rainbow Eggs. And I'm 13 years old.

How many chickens have you got?

I've got 2000 chickens and they lay 1600 eggs a day.

Where do you sell the eggs?

We sell them to local supermarkets and to various stores in Melbourne. We sell them at local farmers' markets as well.



What's life like for your chickens?

My chickens live in a seven-hectare fox-proof run, with a 1.8 m high fence. They're guarded by two Maremma sheepdogs, day and night, to protect them from foxes. They are moved to fresh pasture every day in our two egg-mobiles, which are like big sheds on wheels.

They're fed certified organic grain and barley grass, which is like the sprouts you get in the supermarket, except it's for chickens.

Why do you have two big sheepdogs to protect the chickens?

Well, we used to have our chickens just in normal coops, and we'd let them out during the day. It was all right as long as we locked them up at night. But foxes started coming in the day and taking the chickens. So we built the fox-proof runs, and we thought 'Yes, we're finally safe from foxes!' and we didn't lose any chickens.

But then, a week afterwards, wedge-tailed eagles started swooping over. We thought it was unusual, because we normally see one or two a month, they're very rare. And one day we went up to the chickens and there was a pile of feathers near the fence. It appears the eagles had been taking them.

What's the difference between organic eggs and conventional eggs?

Organic and free-range chickens are always in the pasture.

Organic eggs are from chickens fed a certified organic feed.

Free-range also means they have a more varied diet and can be fed bugs, and worms, and seeds.

How did the business start?

We decided to get some chickens and we went to a breeder near here and we got a mix of maybe 40 different types of chickens. We had them for two years, they were Mum's job but I looked after them, so I got to do all the fun things like collecting eggs and doing wormers and feeders, and Mum had to do the not so fun things like cleaning out the coop. So after having the chickens for about two years, Mum asked me if I wanted to take over the chickens and make it into a business. And I agreed.

Tamsyn, Josh's mum, explains how he came to be in charge of an egg farm:

In the beginning Josh had up to 500 chickens, even 800 chickens of his own.

Then we went to about 1500 chickens, and we got to the point where he physically couldn't do all the work in a day. So, we have help in the morning, and also with the grading and the packing. Josh still goes and collects eggs in the afternoon. But he spends a lot more time with customers. Every weekend he will go to a supermarket and he will talk to customers.

How do you raise new laying hens?

Josh: Well, we raise them in brooders (special heated chicken coops). Then when they're about 13 weeks old, we put them out in the field. When they are about 22 weeks old, which is six months, they start laying eggs.

What's the difference between looking after a little flock and a great big flock?

Josh: Well, with a small flock, you can just look after them. There's not much feed, and they're not very expensive to keep, and collecting eggs is quite a small job. But it comes to a point where you can't do it alone, so we've got employees now, which is really the big main difference.

How long does it take to collect the eggs?

Josh: It's probably about two hours a day for the first collection, for one person to do it. I do the second collection in the afternoon, and that takes me about an hour.

How are the eggs prepared for sale?

Tamsyn: We collect to two different trays (clean and dirty) then put them in the back of the ute and drive them up to the egg room, where they're cleaned and graded. We clean the eggs with a little bit of vinegar. Usually if they're just a little bit dirty we can use a damp cloth, it depends on the time of year. In winter we have more dirty eggs than in summer because of the wet.

Once all the eggs are clean, then we have anywhere between two and three people running the egg grader, because you have one person who loads the eggs, and one person who packs.

How does the grading machine works. It sorts the eggs by their weight, right?

Tamsyn: It's a very simple technology, I think it's been around a hundred years. It has weights that are calibrated so that the heavier eggs drop off first. The first eggs that drop off (into sorting racks) are 70 grams and above, so then it goes 65, 60, 55 and 50 grams.



So they are weighed and each sizes rolls gently into separate compartments?

Tamsyn: Yes. And you choose a combination of different weights, to make a 700 gram dozen or a 600 gram dozen.

So you're not putting all medium in one box or all large in one box, you make them up to the total weight?

Tamsyn: Yes. We have chickens of different ages and chickens lay different size eggs each day, they don't always lay the same egg. Because we only have a few thousand eggs as opposed to hundreds of thousands of eggs (such as at a huge egg farm), we can't have all the same sized eggs in each dozen carton.

What's the final step?

Tamsyn: Well, the other thing that's important is that we only sell perfect eggs.

If an egg has a flaw that jeopardises its integrity, which means it's more likely to crack, we pull those eggs aside.

What is candling?

Tamsyn: When the light shines below the egg, you can see if there are any cracks. And also you can see meat spots and blood spots. We call those our 'reject' eggs and we share those with our neighbours, with friends. We share the love of all our eggs!



Thank you to Josh and Tamsyn for showing us around the Seven Hills Organic Farm and for sharing their knowledge of chickens through Josh's Rainbow Eggs.

You can find out more about Josh and his chickens through the Seven Hills website: www.sevenhillsorganicfarm.com.au

Josh sells his eggs at farmers' markets in Kyneton, Lancefield, Trentham, Riddell's Creek and Woodend, and in supermarkets in Melbourne and Victoria.