

delicious. 2018 PRODUCE AWARDS WINNER

EGGS THE WAY THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO TASTE

John and Eileen Hall's Cavanagh Free Range Eggs have chefs raving and cooks craving. Lucas Hollweg visits their farm in Northern Ireland to find out what their secret is

PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID CHARBIT, STUART WEST



WHAT MAKES THE EGGS WORTHY OF A PRODUCE AWARD?

Quite simply, their outstanding flavour, the result of the hens' free-range lifestyle and foraged diet, is what won them top spot in the From the Field, Primary category. The vivid yellow yolks have a creamy richness and depth of flavour, the whites taste almost nutty and are so firm they form a clear, domed double saucer around the yolk when cracked onto a plate. "Chefs love them," says Eileen. "They poach really well, the whites make lovely pavlovas and fluffy meringues, and the yolks give a wonderful colour to cakes." They're also super fresh – going from hen to table in under two days.

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID ABOUT THE EGGS...

Food writer, chef and TV presenter

Prue Leith: "Excellent in every way"

Editor Karen Barnes: "Buttery, rich and

packed with flavour – even the white"

Food writer Xanthe Clay: "Great rich, savoury yolk"

Chef and TV presenter Andi Oliver:

"A damn fine egg, deep flavoured yolk"

Food writer Lucas Hollweg: "A good egg. Rich yolks, buttery in flavour"

HOW THE HALLS GIVE BACK TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

"We have had farm open days, school groups come to visit and even Scouts coming to find out about the chickens to earn their badges. We also had 30 chefs come to see us one year. Most now wouldn't use any other egg."

4 THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT EGGS

- Hens lay one egg every 25-26 hours – about six eggs a week.
- Eggs age more in a day at room temperature than they do in a week in the fridge.
- Egg yolks are one of the few foods that have high levels of vitamin D.
- You can tell if an egg is raw or cooked by spinning it on its side. If it wobbles, it's raw; if it's hard-boiled, it will spin evenly.



food hero.

Meet the producers

Seventeen years after they started their free-range egg business, John and Eileen Hall still seem genuinely charmed by their chickens. "They're all such characters," says John. "When you open the henhouse doors in the morning, they explode out. It's as if they can't wait to see what they can find."

The family farm at Cavanagh in Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, lies barely 100 yards from the border with the south. Tucked into the green landscape (Cavanagh means 'valley among the hills' in Irish), the place is home to cattle and sheep as well as chickens, though the constant chorus of cackles and clucks leaves little doubt about who rules the roost. There are hens everywhere: spilling out of barns, perched on tree trunks, pecking in the grassy paddocks.

The Halls met at a livestock market – "It's the family joke," says Eileen. They married in 2000 and bought the farm the same year. "We just had the cattle and sheep to start with, but then foot-and-mouth disease came along and we decided to diversify. We both had memories of chickens wandering in and out of our houses when we were growing up, so free-range eggs seemed the obvious way to go. Very few people were doing that here at the time."

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Neither had been an egg producer before, but they knew they wanted to give their chickens the best environment they could. "It's a question of keeping the birds happy," says John. They opened their first henhouse in January 2002. Initially, they sent their eggs to a local packer, but 10 years in, with the business growing, they took the plunge, built a packing house and launched their own label. Cavanagh Free Range Eggs was born.

The flock now consists of 35,000 Lohmann Brown hens, a docile breed renowned for its egg-laying abilities. Housed in four large barns, in social →