

## Practical Bite #10: Don't Waste Your Money on "Free Range" Or "Pasture Raised"

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**How?** If you are looking for "free range" or "pasture raised" eggs or chickens in the grocery store, don't waste your money. The odds of finding true free range or pastured chickens and eggs in the grocery store is next to nil. Skip ahead to Practical Bites #53 and #54 to learn how to find true pasture raised chickens and eggs.

### Why?

**Sina:** This is my favorite Practical Bite because before I met you, I recommended looking for the "pasture raised" label in the grocery store. Boy, was I duped!

**Joel:** Don't feel bad, most people have been duped. When free range poultry became a thing in consumer parlance, industrial factory farmers asked the USDA for a definition that would enable them to continue crowding chickens in confinement houses. Before I tell you what the clever industry wordsmiths concocted, stop a moment and consider what you think about when you hear the phrase "free range poultry." Stop reading for a moment and fantasize in your mind what that looks like.

**Sina:** I imagine chickens having the freedom to run around outside on green, lush grass while hunting for worms and enjoying the sunshine.

**Joel:** If that's your definition of free range then you would be wrong. The official USDA definition of "free range poultry" is actually the freedom to move all appendages to their extreme extension. I'll bet in your wildest dreams you would not have come up with that definition. Most people would have included something about outside, green grass, sunshine, pecking in the soil, chasing down some grasshoppers, and fluffing in a dirt pocket – like you did. That seems reasonable. But according to officialdom, as long as a chicken can fully extend its leg, or fully extend its wings—not necessarily at the same time, mind you—or fully extend its head above its body, that's free range. No grass. No outside. No bugs. No exercise. Only someone purposely trying to obfuscate the obvious could conceive of such a preposterous misrepresentation of the generally accepted meaning of "free range."

**S**ina: Wow! I used to feel good about buying organic, free-range eggs in the grocery store. I thought I was speaking with my dollars to help give chickens a better quality of life. But the “free range” label is just a marketing farce.

**J**oel: Yes. And, “organic” isn’t any better. Organic certification requires that the chickens have “outdoor access.” I remember the first time I visited an organic certified egg factory farm. The massive confinement house looked just like any other massive confinement poultry house except for one curious detail: surrounding the exterior of the house was a 3-foot strip and then a fence. The house had pop-holes every 50 feet or so, which are little 1-foot x 1-foot doors that enabled the chickens - if they ever wanted to - to step outside. Of course, the regulations that require “outdoor access” have a caveat: “weather permitting.” The result? Well, today it’s too hot; tomorrow it’s too wet; the next day it’s too dry; the next day it’s too cold. Weather permitting can be used to exclude the birds any day of the year. And who wants to step onto a 3 ft. strip? It’s hardly enough room to turn around.

Again, I ask the question: what do you think “outdoor access” means? Stop reading. Think about it.

Okay, I’ll bet you thought about pastures and nature and exercise and soil and earthworms, maybe even a bluebird or indigo bunting flitting around. Of course. Any reasonable person would. Any person you would trust. But you see, folks, the wordsmiths and regulation police are not interested in truth or trust; they are only interested in pulling a fast one on duplicitous consumers just like you and I. We wouldn’t think about playing this fast and loose with the truth, but when you’re trying to pass yourself off as better than you are, and billions of dollars in sales are on the line, you become extremely inventive at clever speak.

After one of my editorials in *The Stockman Grass Farmer*, a certified organic pig producer said he didn’t think it was possible to raise an ecologically-friendly hog on anything but concrete. Yes, concrete aprons—you could call them porches—are the “outdoor access” for hogs. I’m sure every consumer who reads the organic certification requirements for “outdoor access” fantasizes about concrete slabs.

The same wordsmithing has been done with “pasture raised.” Pastured poultry, whether you get it local or shipped to your doorstep, is the gold standard for healthy terrain birds. But,

the odds of finding true pastured chickens in the grocery store are next to nil.

**S**ina: So, an animal is still considered “pasture-raised” even if that animal never steps onto grass or pasture. And, an animal can be raised on a concrete slab and still be labeled as “organic.” This is exactly why we must look beyond the labels to find the truth, and to protect our wallets. Keep in mind that you usually pay a premium for foods carrying those labels.

**J**oel: That’s exactly right. I was recently in Colorado doing a food and farm conference and a guy came up to me at the after-conference meal at a local restaurant. He’d heard about me, and wanted to meet me. He produces 9,000 dozen eggs a week from 20,000 chickens in a house with pasture. He calls these pastured eggs. Now Sina, you can’t have 20,000 chickens in a stationary house and have any semblance of pasture. First of all, a chicken will only walk 200 yards away from shelter. So even though you have them on 50 acres, they will never cover it all. The effective range of any chicken, no matter how free range, is only a circle 400 yards in diameter. A circle 400 yards in diameter is only 25 acres and I don’t know anybody who has a circular pasture. Anyway, that’s nearly 1,000 chickens per acre, which will quickly turn into a moonscape. That’s a total nonrotated square footage per chicken of about 43.

In contrast, we give our 1,000 birds a quarter acre every three days, which is about 10 square feet per bird, but it’s a new 10 square feet every 3 days. So, in a 240-day season, that’s 80 paddock shifts times 10 square feet per, offering 800 square feet per bird. See what moving does?

I could go on in this vein for some time, but I hope by now you’re starting to see a pattern of purposeful at worst, and negligent at best, clever wordsmithing to present things on labels, advertising, and sales pitches as they really aren’t. No normal person could or would possibly convolute phrase meanings the way the government industrial food complex does. The first thing to understand is that words often, if not generally, have no objective meaning, especially on food labels and in food advertising. What you think from the words could be worlds different from actuality.

So, first, be aware of clever speak as a genre, as a skill. And, second, don’t buy “free range” or “pasture raised” chicken or eggs from the grocery store; it’s a labeling gimmick. Instead, skip ahead to Practical Bites #53 and 54 to learn how to find truly pasture-raised chickens and eggs.