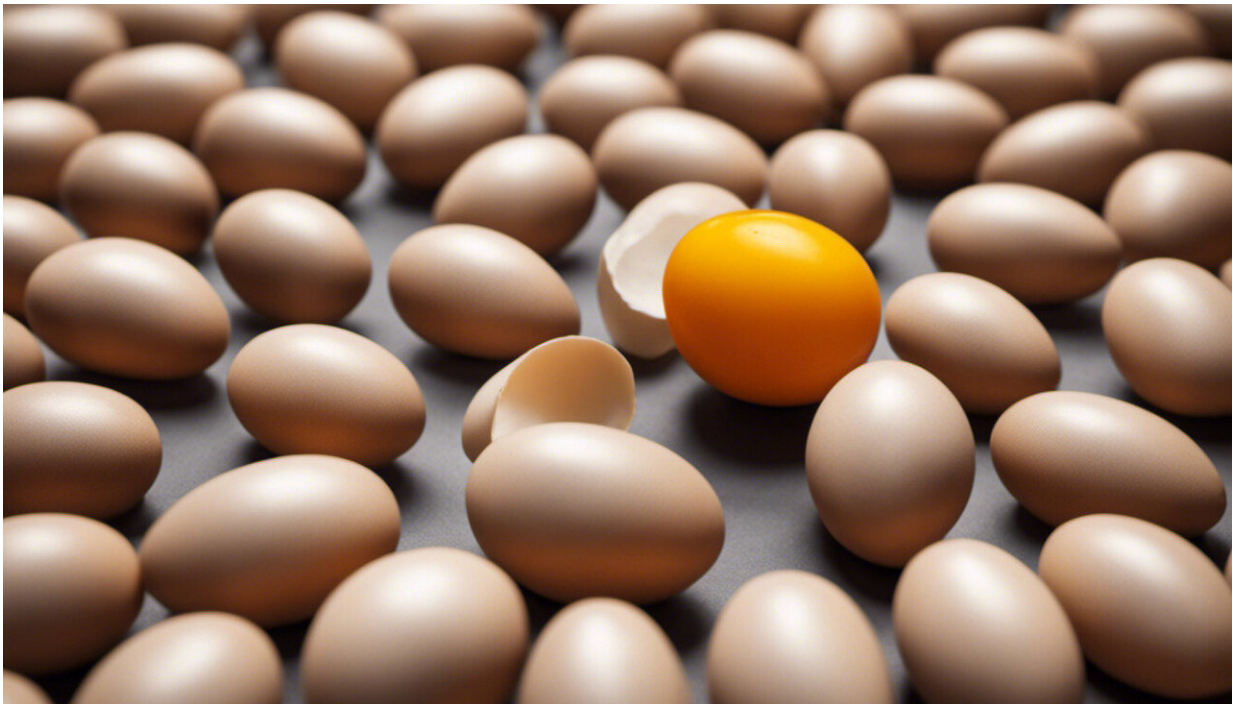


What the egg crisis reveals about our food system

April 24 2023, by Molly McDonough



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

This isn't the first time the price of eggs has skyrocketed. During the mid-19th-century gold rush, San Francisco's population ballooned from around 800 to more than 20,000, creating a scarcity of chicken eggs that hiked their price to nearly \$1 per egg—the equivalent of \$30 per egg today. This increased demand for another type of egg: that of the murre,

a seabird inhabiting the nearby Farallones Islands. Poachers flocked to the islands and boats transporting eggs were hijacked, resulting in an "egg war" that endured for 30 years.

Inflation is driving up the price of just about everything on grocery shelves these days. But there's something about the sticker shock of egg prices—up about 70% compared to a year ago—that stands out. "It feels particularly unsettling," says Tufts anthropology professor Cathy Stanton. "For many people, eggs are a comforting, almost a cozy kind of food. They're round and smooth. They've seemed so reliable and steady and familiar."

The price increases reflect a confluence of crises, from the spread of avian flu H5N1 and increased fuel costs, to supply chain disruptions and corporate price gouging. And they hit close to home. Eggs are not only a dietary staple; they're a food that, in many cultures, is imbued with complex meaning. "Eggs are often associated with the female, with procreative processes, and with domestic spaces," Stanton says. This widespread (although not universal) set of assumptions can give eggs an "emotional charge." Perhaps that's one reason why the food's sudden price increase has felt "jarring," she adds.

Eggs have symbolic meaning in many cultures across the world, representing concepts as fundamental as the Earth, fertility, resurrection, and even creation. According to Tufts history professor Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, who teaches the History of Consumption, eggs are central to Hindu, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Syrian, Persian, and Finnish cosmologies, and they have been a cornerstone of the human diet for thousands of years.

Archaeological evidence indicates that chickens were domesticated in Southeast Asia before 7500 BC and had arrived in Greece by 800 BC. Ancient Romans enjoyed eggs *frixa*, *elixa*, *et hapala* (fried, boiled, and

soft). Egg-laying chickens accompanied the first colonists traveling from Europe to North America, where egg production was confined to homesteading households and family farms—and predominantly overseen by women, says Stanton—until innovations in breeding and technology in the 19th century encouraged production to proliferate.

One such invention in 1879, the commercially viable artificial incubator, "singlehandedly changed the future of chicken and egg consumption," Baghdiantz-McCabe says. "Farmers could easily hatch hundreds of chicks at once, increasing their flocks and in turn, the number of eggs available." Within a few decades, inventor Lyman Byce had turned his town of Petaluma, California into the "Egg Basket of the World," supplying one in every five eggs available to Americans.

Eggs may have been a staple protein source and cooking ingredient, but they weren't always a morning food. Baghdiantz-McCabe credits their predominance on American breakfast plates to a public relations guru named Edward Bernays who, in the 1920s, was hired by bacon-producing Beech-Nut Company to promote the meat as part of a healthy breakfast. Bernays hired a New York physician to survey 5,000 doctors across the country, asking whether a light or heavy breakfast was desirable; apparently, 4,500 wrote back in favor of the latter. Bernays had those results published in newspapers with a convenient suggestion for the perfect "heavy" combo: bacon and eggs.

By 1950, Americans were eating a whopping average of 389 eggs per year—and the industrialization of agriculture was in full swing, boosting production to meet demand. Diversified family farms declined, giving way to massive egg factories and poultry plants. That trend has continued for decades, with corporate consolidation resulting in facilities that now have more than a million laying hens.

It has helped the egg become the cheapest source of protein available to

Americans, says Baghdiantz-McCabe—but there are consequences of those low prices that we typically don't see. Most laying hens in America spend their entire lives indoors in tiny cages smaller than a piece of printer paper, never seeing daylight or the outdoors. "In such circumstances, a contagious flu can be devastating as the birds are crammed together," she adds.

When you put it in perspective, Cathy Stanton says, the prices we've been paying for eggs for decades have actually been shockingly low. "People are screaming out now about \$6 dozens of eggs—but really, a \$1.50 dozen of eggs is a ridiculous thing, and that's what should be jumping out at people," she says. "That price was only possible because you have these factory farms with millions of chickens in horrible conditions."

To the anthropologist, who is the academic advisor for Tufts' minor in [food systems](#) and nutrition, the egg price hikes are emblematic of our broader food system and the way we understand its economics. "The system that we have now operates on a massive scale," Stanton says. "At that scale, individual items are worth almost nothing." Americans actually pay a much smaller proportion of their disposable wealth on food than anyone else in the world, she adds, because of that huge system and its resulting overabundance.

Despite taking a major hit in the 1970s—when doctors linked blood cholesterol levels to a higher risk of heart disease, a fear that is now considered overblown—American egg consumption has been steadily creeping upwards in recent years. If eggs were a dispensable part of our diet, one would expect that today's high prices would finally curb that consumption. Instead, says Baghdiantz-McCabe, "consumers have not stopped buying eggs." In fact, egg sales increased in 2022 as prices climbed.

The price of eggs isn't stopping Baghdiantz-McCabe from partaking in a tradition she first practiced decades ago with her grandmother: decorating Easter eggs. For about 30 years now, she's been dyeing them using onion skins each year, a technique borrowed from a Georgian friend. Dyeing eggs is connected to historical threads reaching all the way back to 65,000-year-old decorated ostrich eggs that archaeologists have uncovered in South Africa. "Eggs have always fascinated people because of their shape," she says. "They're just beautiful. Plus—they're delicious."

Provided by Tufts University

Citation: What the egg crisis reveals about our food system (2023, April 24) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-04-egg-crisis-reveals-food.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.