

Organic eggs in a (nut)shell

Pocket guide to organic eggs and chicken farming in Germany



Dear readers,

With the shocking evidence of the often dire condition in which laying hens and broilers are raised, there is a growing awareness that we need to change our buying behaviour. Organic poultry products allegedly guarantee cruelty-free eggs and chicken meat. But how to navigate through the eclectic – and often very opaque – product ranges available in the German markets?

This pocket guide sheds light on this complex market in a concise and clear manner. The first part introduces the key issues and initiatives in organic poultry farming along the three trajectories of animal welfare, transparency, and sustainable practice. In the second part, three small-scale organic farmers with innovative concepts to raise happy chickens give us an insight into their work and motivation.

I wish you an insightful and stimulating reading!



About the author

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» At what price do the other chickens perform better? They pay the price of animal health. « – Inga Günther

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Pocket Guide

Animal welfare, transparency, sustainable practice

1

ANIMAL WELFARE

There are 42 million laying hens in Germany, almost 4.9 million of them on organic farms. Some of them are housed in small mobile barns, while others live in large buildings that can house up to 30,000 chickens (Schrot&Korn 2019). Species-appropriate husbandry and feeding of livestock are a central element of organic farming. Yet, due to these vast differences in the poultry raising industry, there are equally large differences in standards of animal welfare even in the organic sector. Unfortunately, EU “organic” – and even labels of stricter organic food associations – **do not guarantee truly species-appropriate husbandry of chickens.**

WHAT SIZE ARE THE HERDS?

Organic farming does not mean that the animals live only in small groups. First, there is a **difference between laying hens and broiler chickens**. The latter usually has half the space of the former. Based on the EU regulation on organic farming, farmers may keep four laying hens per square metre of coop. In total, up to 3,000 hens or 4,800 broilers may be kept in a coop. However, the word “coop” is a misnomer here. A building may contain several coops where the individual barns are separated from each other with partitions. On average, a German organic farm keeps about 10,000 chickens (Doeckel 2019, BLE 2018).

Organic farmers are equally pressured to make a profit, which is easier to realise with large barns. This is also the case with the stationary barns of the organic associations Bioland, Demeter, and Naturland. Naturland even allows 12,000 hens to be kept in one coop; Bioland limits this number to 6,000. Only Demeter stops at 3,000 chickens per farm. Due to their size, animal rights activists argue that these **barns are reminiscent of the banned battery cages**, only without bars and with free range in daytime (Eversberg 2020).

IS ORGANIC RAISING FUNDAMENTALLY BETTER THAN FREE-RANGE/ INDOOR HUSBANDRY?

Organic chickens are not necessarily happier - but farmers who keep organic chickens and sell organic eggs have to **meet a number of requirements that conventional farmers are not bound to.**

First, in organic barns, a maximum of six hens share one square metre, which is still **almost double the space in conventional free-range and free-run within an enclosed barn**. Moreover, the hens are allowed to walk outdoors. There they have space to peck and scratch and that this is an important indicator of animal welfare.

Second, the chickens must always be fed with organic feed, with an additional five percent of conventional protein feed allowed within EU organic standards. To ensure that the hens can peck in an animal-friendly way, their beaks must not be trimmed, which is often the case in conventional husbandry – especially due to feather pecking out of boredom (Ippach and Hinsch 2019, 114). Genetic engineering in animal feed is prohibited. When treating the hens in case of illness, natural remedies and homeopathic remedies are to be preferred (Schrot&Korn 2019; tagesschau.de 2013).

THE PROBLEM HIGH PERFORMANCE CHICKENS: High performance in ‘egg production’ and ‘meat production’ is “mutually exclusive” (Günther, 2020), or rather **negatively correlated**. Therefore, both conventional and organic chickens are bred either as laying hens, with ‘useless’ male chicks [see: BROTHER COCKERELS, p. 4], or as broiler chickens for fattening. They have a short life as well. High-performance hens lay 300 eggs or more per year – an extreme physical strain. If their laying performance decreases after 15 months, they are slaughtered (Schrot&Korn 2019). Organic broilers usually become ten weeks old, which means that they become twice as old as their conventional counterparts.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE OUTDOOR SPACE: A new EU organic regulation came into force in 2021. However, it does not provide for significant improvements in the organic management of laying hens. Just as conventional free-range chickens, in organic farming, each chicken has four square metres of outdoor space at its disposal. Yet, the brother cockerels of the laying hens require only one square metre (BÖLW, 2020). Further, the outside area does not have to be available all the time, only for one third of a hen’s life at minimum (Eversberg 2020).

In practice, moreover, the outdoor area is rarely used. In nature, the chicken is a forest edge dweller, and a canopy offers protection from natural enemies, such as birds of prey. The function of the forest edge is taken over by the coop in captivity. The animals are reluctant to move far away from it. It is important to offer many hiding places and shelters, which is often not the case. According to the EU regulation on organic farming, these hiding places must also be available – but they may be 150 metres away from the exit of the coop and thus too far for the chicken to venture outside (Doeckel 2019). In this way, some large organic poultry farmers circumvent the EU regulation, while keeping their organic certification.

A POPULAR ALTERNATIVE: A viable substitute for the stationary coops, especially those that house thousands of chickens, are mobile barns. They are becoming increasingly popular in both organic and free-range farming. As the name suggests, these are clearly smaller housing systems with a maximum of 500 chickens. They are moved from one place to another on a regular basis. On the one hand, this has the advantage that the chickens are more often confronted with new environmental stimuli and fresh meadows for picking grass. More importantly, however, the changing ground on which the chickens scratch and peck is not so heavily contaminated with parasites (Doeckel 2019).



IMAGE Mobile barn at the Hermannsdorfer Landwerkstätten. Tatiana Valyaeva, 2020.

ORGANIC EGGS WITHOUT KILLING OF MALE CHICKS? Male chicks from the laying line are killed after hatching because they are not suitable for fattening – even in organic farming (Minkmar 2020). More than 40 million male day-old chicks are shredded or killed with gas every year as they do not bring any profit for the farmers (Ippach and Hinsch, 2019: 114). Because high-performance hens are bred for egg-laying, their so-called brother cockerels produce little meat and are growing slower than the male chicks from chicken fattening breeds. However, more and more producers in the organic sector are raising chickens due to ethical concerns. Large supermarkets, such as Aldi and Lidl, also advertise their move to “murder-free” organic eggs. Yet, the advocacy group foodwatch sued the discounter Aldi in 2020 for consumer deception. They argue that Aldi fails to mention that it only “ends chick killing” in eggs sold as a whole but not in eggs in processed food, which takes up half of all eggs consumed in Germany. Further, Aldi’s campaign suggests that it has already abolished chick-killing, although its stated goal is to convert its range by 2022 (Wolfschmidt 2020).

INITIATIVES FOR THE BROTHER COCKERELS: For about ten years, there have been initiatives in Germany to raise and fatten the brothers of the laying hens – the so-called brother cockerels. The largest and best known of these are the Bruderhahn Initiative Deutschland (BID) and the “Hähnlein” concept of the Fürstenhof producer group. In addition, there are numerous smaller initiatives. Through the BID, 40,000 brother cockerels are raised annually, which is cross-subsidised by a surcharge on the eggs – as “four cents for ethics” (BLE, 2020; Minkmar 2020). According to Lisa Minkmar from the BID there are still some concerns that require more agency on the consumer side. For instance, people are very willing to pay four cents extra per egg but selling the meat of the cockerel is often more difficult. Consumers like to buy the eggs with the ‘ethical added value’, and they think it is great that the brother cockerels are raised, but they are not further interested in where the meat ends up. It is difficult to communicate that consumers have to buy the meat, too. Many consumers are also vegetarian. Therefore, **some farmers are worried about starting to raise brother cockerels because they are afraid that they will not be able to sell those** (Minkmar 2020).

Raising, feeding and processing the brother cockerels is more expensive than a conventional broiler chicken. Yet, organic farming is based on the principle of circular economy. If the chicks are killed shortly after they were “produced”, that does not correspond to the ethical conception of most organic food associations and initiatives, even if the shredded chicks are partly reused for animal feed or cosmetics. In response to an enquiry from oekolandbau.de, two of the farming associations with the largest membership, Naturland and Demeter, stated that more than half of their member farms keep laying hens with the brother cockerels. Bioland estimates that brother cockerels are currently reared for about a quarter of the Bioland eggs produced (BLE, 2020). Lisa Minkmar agrees that “a rooster should grow up to a valuable food source and not just be used as a waste product” (Minkmar 2020). She also cautions against initiatives, such as the one by Aldi, that advertise the rearing of the brother cockerels – although she generally welcomes the change. The BID has a certification that monitors that the brother cockerels have lived for at least 14 weeks. Otherwise, it is generally lawful to slaughter the brother cockerels very early, for example after a week. Or one could take them abroad or raise them conventionally: **“The brother roosters do not have to be raised organically, although the sister hens lay organic eggs”** (Minkmar 2020).

2 TRANSPARENCY

The only way to be sure that species-appropriate husbandry is put into practice is to buy from local farmers where it is possible to visit the coop or see the outlet space in the meadows. Usually, family-owned or small farms offer farm tours. What to do if there are not any farms nearby? Even though conventional free-range producers may, in theory, ensure good living conditions for the chickens, the likelihood of a species-appropriate husbandry increased dramatically with the strict rules of organic food associations. Likewise, some organic supermarkets or local markets advertise more transparently the source and upbringing of their chickens.

CAN ORGANIC PRODUCTS DO WITHOUT FACTORY FARMING AND ANIMAL SUFFERING?

In 2020, the political tv magazine “Frontal21”, together with animal rights activists uncover that many large-scale producers of organic eggs – explicitly those that supply to discount supermarket chains – utilise loopholes in the EU regulations and cheat the end consumers who believe that organic implies a cruelty-free life for the chickens. Animal rights activists report on huge ‘organic’ facilities with up to 40,000 laying hens in one barn complex. Videos published by animal rights organisations such as Animal Rights Watch document that even in facilities controlled by KAT [see NUMBER ON THE EGG, p. 6] the chickens are cramped in a dark, tight and soiled space (Göbel et al. 2020). These black sheep in organic poultry farming receive the same EU organic certification as the one’s that raise the chickens in a species-appropriate manner. The vast difference in husbandry between those is impossible to differentiate for the end consumer.

WHAT IS AN ORGANIC EGG?

What is an organic egg? Since 1991, the EU organic law is the basic law of the organic food industry. The EU organic law applies to plant and animal produce and feed from organic farming. By the way, the terms “organic” and “ecological” are protected and used synonymously.

In order to be able to better distinguish organic food from conventional products for the consumer, Germany introduced the state-controlled organic seal in 2001, with which only food produced in accordance with the EU Organic Regulation may be labelled. In 2012, the European Union followed suit with its own organic label (tagesschau.de 2013, BMEL 2020).



IMAGE The German organic label (left) and the EU organic label for organic goods produced within the European Union. BMEL, 2020.

NUMBER ON THE EGG: The origin of almost every egg is indicated by the producer code on the eggshell. Anyone who wants to know the producer can check it on the internet. Consumers can find the information at <https://www.was-steht-auf-dem-ei.de> (in German). The Association for Controlled Alternative Animal Husbandry (Verein für kontrollierte alternative Tierhaltungsformen, KAT) estimates that data is available for 90 to 95 percent of the eggs sold in Germany today. It certifies the entire production chain, from the feed to the laying farm. The association also checks whether the laying hens are really kept as the farms promise and advertise.

Nonetheless, the organic poultry market is highly untransparent, despite supervisory authorities such as KAT. The code on the egg may disclose the company register but it is often impossible to find information on the husbandry itself, such as actual location of the farm, size of coop, amount of chicken raised, etc. After testing a random sample of eggs from various retailers of organic eggs over a few months in 2020, it became apparent for the author that it is more difficult to track the origins of eggs from large supermarket chains, such as Lidl or Edeka. Organic associations, like Bioland, and some organic supermarkets, such as Alnatura, try to advertise their farmers on their websites to make the supply-chain more transparent and more accessible to the general public.

WHAT DOES THE PRODUCER CODE MEAN?



The first digit denotes the type of husbandry (see table below). Each has its own code number. A '0' means organic. The letters denote the country of origin. For instance, DE stands for Germany, AT for Austria, and NL for the Netherlands. The next first two digits indicate the region of origin. 09 stands for Bavaria. The remaining digits indicate the laying farm and barn.

INFO BOX: HOW GERMAN LAYING HENS ARE KEPT

Type of farming/ Digit	Area in the barn / outdoors	Characteristics
Small group / 3	Ca. 12 chickens per sqm/ No outdoor run	Comprises 20 to 60 animals living in cages with at least 50 cm ceiling height, stacked next to and on top of each other
Floor / 2	Max. 9 chickens per sqm/ No outdoor exercise area	Chickens move freely in the barn. Sometimes a room with daylight is connected. A maximum of 6 000 hens per house is allowed.
Outdoor / 1	Max. 9 chickens per sqm/ At least 4 sqm per chicken outdoors	The animals live in the barn under the same conditions as in floor husbandry - but have outdoor access during the day . The outdoor area should be greened.
Organic / 0	Max. 6 chickens per sqm/ Minimum 4 sqm per chicken outdoors	The EU organic regulation allows a maximum of 3,000 hens per group. Only organic feed is fed. Organic farming associations such as Demeter or Bioland prescribe additional criteria.

OVERVIEW OF THE MAJOR ORGANIC ASSOCIATIONS



DEMETER: The oldest organic association in Germany is Demeter. It has been in existence since 1924 and is now active on all continents worldwide. In Germany, 1,500 farmers and 330 manufacturers and processors work for Demeter, as well as contract partners from the natural and health food wholesale trade. More than 500 Demeter partner shops are intensively committed to biodynamic quality which can be traced back to the impulses of Rudolf Steiner, who also initiated Waldorf education at the beginning of the 20th century. Due to a living circular economy, this agriculture is often considered one of the most sustainable forms of land management. In contrast to the EU regulation, they rely, for example, on total farm conversion, renouncing the shredding of chicks. The feed must be 100 percent organic. They are much stricter about the use of additives and flavourings. Natural flavourings are banned, only certain flavouring extracts are allowed (demeter.de 2021).



NATURLAND: Naturland is active both regionally and globally. Naturland is one of the largest organic farming associations. In Germany alone, 3,500 producers work according to its standards. At its core is a holistic approach that includes sustainable management, practised nature and climate protection, safeguarding and preserving soil, air and water, and consumer protection. The standards also cover areas that are not regulated by the EU Organic Regulation (naturland.de 2021).



BIOLAND: With its more than 7,300 farmers, gardeners, beekeepers and winegrowers, Bioland is one of the largest farming associations in Germany. In addition to the producers, 1,000 partners from production and trade such as bakeries, dairies, butchers and gastronomy also work according to its own mission statement, which concerns the following aspects: circular economy, promotion of soil fertility, species-appropriate animal husbandry, sustainable production of valuable foods, promotion of biodiversity, preservation of the natural foundations of life and securing an environment worth living in (bioland.de 2021).



BIOKREIS: The aim of Biokreis is to promote close regional and fair cooperation between the partners. To this end, 1300 farmers, 200 processors and 200 consumers now work together in a network according to the Biokreis guidelines. The basic prerequisite for certification is, for example, a complete conversion of the farm to organic farming.



Another factor is rural agriculture, that is, to support and to promote family structures, promote small and regional structures in distinction to large-scale industrial structures, because it also has an impact on biodiversity (Lehmann, 2020). According to Stephanie Lehmann from Biokreis "Every year, many small, farmer-owned businesses have to close down. As consumers, it is important to support small businesses through informed buying behaviour" (Lehmann, 2020). The Biokreis regional & fair label further distinguishes these local structures.

3 SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

One fact is clear, the current way of chicken husbandry – even in the organic sector is unsustainable. The organic sector welcomes the current goal of the German government to stop killing male chicks by 2022 at the latest. The three viable alternatives for ethical poultry production are *in ovo* sex identification, dual-purpose chicken or brother cockerel rearing. Yet, cruelty-free raising of both male and female chickens is costly, and alternative breeds are still in the minority.

WHAT IS THE INDUSTRY'S POSITION ON IN-OVO-SEX DETERMINATION?

Although the practice of killing male chicks has long been criticised, it was tolerated because it was feared that hatcheries would move abroad due to a lack of suitable alternatives. In June 2019, the Federal Administrative Court ruled that the killing of male chicks remains permissible under animal welfare law **on a transitional basis** until alternative methods for *in ovo* sex determination become available. The Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) now wants to ban the killing of chicks nationwide from 2022 (BLE, 2020).

CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE

High dependence concerning breeds: Farmers have become dependent on big corporate groups with their high-performance, single-purpose breeds.

Four corporate groups have basically a monopoly on chicken breeds: Erich-Wesjohann Group (DE), Groupe Grimaud (FR), Tyson (US), and Hendrix Genetics (NL) (in Gura, 2015).

Hard work for little profit: Farmers are under a lot of pressure to produce cheap organic eggs and meat. Hourly wage for farmers is often below minimum wage and they often work on weekends (Frühschütz 2013, Lehmann 2020)

Environmental aspects: The more animal-friendly dual-purpose chickens grow slower, need more space, more feed, cause more emissions (Grashorn 2016).

Costs: Dual-purpose chickens and the raising of brother cockerels means “more feed, more space, less meat and eggs [which] causes higher costs” (Grashorn 2016)

Uncertain customer behaviour: On the one hand, customers demand more animal welfare; on the other, they want low-priced products and high quality. Brother cockerels are comparatively small and bony, and dual-purpose chickens are also unlikely to approach the ‘quality’ of high-performance broilers. (Grashorn 2016).

WHAT HAPPENES WITH THE BROTHER COCKERELS? It is still unclear whether all associations will actually be able to switch to broiler fattening by the end of 2021. According to Inga Günther, Managing Director of the Organic Animal Breeding Ltd. (Ökologische Tierzucht gGmbH, ÖTZ), the biggest problem the association farms are currently facing is the lack of barn capacity and its coordination. There are also too few slaughterhouses to slaughter the roosters and too few processing companies to turn them into interesting products for consumers (Günther in BLE, 2020).

WHAT ARE THE METHODS FOR *IN OVO* SEX DETERMINATION IN THE EGG? The EU regulation on organic farming does not stipulate any requirements for the handling of male 'laying hen' chicks. *In ovo* sex determination may also be used in organic farming. So far, only Demeter has stipulated that the cockerels must be reared according to the association's internal guidelines. Currently, the two most promising methods for sorting out male chicks in laying lines are two *in ovo* sex determination methods – the 'endocrinological' and the 'spectroscopic' method – before the chicks are hatched (BLE 2020).

From the point of view of animal welfare activists, these procedures are not a suitable alternative to killing chicks. The first issue is that with this procedure, the sex can be determined at the earliest from the ninth day. However, chicken embryos already feel pain from the seventh day of incubation. Thus, ***in ovo* selection merely shifts forward the killing of male chicks** but does **not prevent it**. As the BMEL announced, the endocrinological method will therefore only function as a bridging technology until 2023 (BLE 2020). Second, according to the organic associations, the (ethical) root evil is selection for fattening or laying breeds. From their viewpoint, this **one-sided breeding** would only be **further cemented by *in ovo* selection**. They also argue that the expensive technology for *in ovo* selection would drive organic hatcheries and organic rearing farms into even greater dependence on large corporations (BLE 2020).

THE END OF SINGLE-PURPOSE BREEDS? An alternative to the common practice of breeding chickens for either laying or fattening lines, are **dual-purpose chickens**. The cockerel produces meat; the hen produces eggs. This means that the cockerel is not subsidised by the hen, unlike the brother cockerel concept. With the right marketing, the hen's lower egg yield can be balanced out by its heavier meat yield at the end of its life. The organic associations are therefore focusing on the breeding of dual-purpose breeds in the long term. Demeter and Bioland founded the Organic Animal Breeding Ltd. (ÖTZ) in 2015. The breeding company is establishing independent structures for breeding poultry with a focus on dual-purpose. The aim is to produce robust hens and roosters that can cope well with regional feed components and food production residues. With old breeds from the GDR and French Bresse chickens, the ÖTZ created modern dual-purpose chicken breed "Coffee & Cream" (Günther, 2020).

However, dual-purpose breeding is currently still in its infancy. According to Inga Günther, less than one percent of chicks sold in 2019 were dual-purpose chicks - half male and half female. If farms do not want the *in ovo* selection after the legal phase-out of chick killing, the only option for the time being is to rear brother cockerels. Further, the term 'dual-purpose' could still imply that hens from conventional hatcheries are imported to organic farms in Germany, and that their 'brothers' grow up in huge fattening farms somewhere else (Günther, 2020).



» A few chickens belong on every farm, and not tens of thousands on a few farms « – Kathrin Goebel

Spotlight on

HOFGUT OBERFELD LANDWIRTSCHAFT AG



Hofgut Oberfeld
Landwirtschaft AG

The Hofgut Oberfeld in Darmstadt, Hesse is an organic farm with a Demeter certification that raises dual-purpose chickens. On the farm, agriculture and animal husbandry are closely coordinated – as per biodynamic principles. Kathrin Goebel, the manager responsible for animal husbandry, tells us more about their chickens.

COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CHICKENS?

Kathrin Goebel: We are a Demeter farm, and we have 1,250 free-range laying hens held in three mobile barns. We receive our pullets from a Demeter farm in Bavaria that keeps some of the brother cockerels. We raise the pullets and also most of the brother cockerels for fattening. As for the hens, we have laying hens from the ÖTZ. Our breed is called Coffee and Cream – and is a dual-purpose breed. This means the lay fewer eggs, but they put on more meat, the brothers as well. Conventionally, laying hens are bred one-sidedly for laying performance and the roosters have very little meat. We try to be more balanced, which is not easy. If I breed more for eggs, the meat yield automatically goes down. But what is also important to me is that with the ÖTZ, we are building up poultry breeding that is local and “farmer-centric”. Worldwide there are only a few large corporations that breed chickens and that is a gigantic dependence.

WHAT DOES ORGANIC HUSBANDRY AND BREEDING MEAN FOR YOU?

Kathrin Goebel: Another advantage of Coffee and Cream is, of course, in organic breeding. When we take care of organic chickens, then of course we also pay attention to other criteria.

Most farmers keep their chickens in barns or deep litter. Free-range chickens are still only a marginal group. When I breed organically, I assume that they are kept outdoors, which means that this is a key criterion, and it also applies to the breeding and the parent animals. Then the feed is a criterion. We want to feed with hundred percent organic feed and that is not a given even with all organic farms. Demeter is the only association that demands one hundred percent organic feed, all the others are allowed to mix in five percent of conventional feed. You might think, “Five percent - that's almost nothing”, but if it is about artificial amino acids, then it can make a huge difference. It makes a difference if I breed conventionally until the hatchery and only then switch to organic.



WHAT IS THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE HOFGUT OBERFELD?

Kathrin Goebel: The farm is part of the company. The cheese dairy, the bakery, the store and the café are all part of the company. It is a joint stock company, and the shareholders are citizens of Darmstadt. There are three of us in the management. In the agriculture we have two to three permanent employees, and then we have two to three trainees. In the business, however, we have about 60 employees, most of whom work in marketing and processing, in the cheese dairy, and bakery. A large part of the grain is baked in the bakery and the bread is then also sold in the farm store, and all the milk from the cows is also processed in the dairy.

HOW DO YOU TAKE CARE OF THE CHICKENS?

Kathrin Goebel: We go twice a day to the chickens to collect eggs and to check on them, and once a week we have a fixed date where we resupply the mobile barns. The small barns are even self-sufficient with water and feed; thus, we just restock the stores. If necessary, we move the barns. The chickens need very high-quality feed, especially wheat, and the Oberfeld [the field] is not really a wheat location. We have very light soils that are more suitable for barley and rye. We can therefore always sell barley and rye and have to buy wheat for the chickens. I find it always amazing to see how much cropland is required to raise chickens. You can roughly say that you need one hectare of grain cultivation for a hundred chickens – that's quite a lot. We have 120 hectares of land here directly on the Oberfeld and there are many farms that have much less land, so perhaps only 40 hectares of cropland for several tens of thousands of chickens. It is obvious, that this stands in stark disproportion to each other. For me, it is always important to keep an eye on this. That is, even if the shop sells twice as much, then that would still not really be an option for us to keep more chickens here. A few chickens belong on every farm, and not tens of thousands on a few farms.

HOW ARE YOUR CHICKEN KEPT?

Kathrin Goebel: Well, they are free-range so they can decide for themselves whether they go in- or outside. When the sun is shining directly, chickens don't like that at all. Then, they also stay in the barn or in the shade. We keep roosters in the flock. They structure the flock a bit or they also look out for enemies, like the hawk here in the field. The hens have a certain behaviour towards the roosters and vice versa, of course. The roosters also have their territory: some stay inside, others are outside. If they get in each other's way, then there is also some trouble.



DO THE HENS HAVE SEASONS, WHEN THEY LAY MORE OR FEWER EGGS?

Kathrin Goebel: Our chickens do not. That's also because we have a light programme in the winter during the day. We practically artificially extend the day. Otherwise, they would stop laying in the fall and start again in the spring. That's just not economically feasible. Chickens kept in barns or deep litters are completely decoupled from the day and night rhythm though. The chickens no longer know whether it is day or night because of the light programme. All that is absent in organic farming, because we work with free-range and then you cannot decouple it.

HOW LONG DO THE CHICKENS STAY WITH YOU?

Kathrin Goebel: The pullets arrive to us when they are about 18 to 20 weeks old, and then we keep them for twelve to 14 months. We cycle three groups over the year, so the timing also depends on holidays such as Christmas and Easter. The brother cockerels are fattened for five months since they are slow growing. Conventionally fattened chicks would be reared for about 80 days, that is, three months.



WHERE DO YOU SELL YOUR EGGS AND POULTRY?

Kathrin Goebel: We sell the eggs directly in our farm store. Older laying hens become soup hens, while the brother cockerels are either sold as fresh meat or in “the glass” as Fricassee. In Germany, an average citizen consumes the eggs that one hen lays per year. In practice, it implies that in addition to one’s egg consumption, one should also consume one soup hen and a brother cockerel. We try to convey that to our customers, because eggs are always popular, but with the meat we must carry out somewhat more persuasion work. Because we market directly, the eggs go unsorted and unstamped in the store and that is already a relief for us. People also find it great because it simply confirms once again that the eggs are local.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF HAVING AN ORGANIC FARM?

Kathrin Goebel: We have a very strong farm store, which means that we are totally independent from other trade structures. Conversely, we have direct contact with the customer and must then communicate and explain things accordingly.

CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE?

Kathrin Goebel: Many farms do not raise the brother cockerels. Now a big topic is whether the shredding of chicks will be banned. But then it will be the start of in-ovo-selection. The Demeter Association has decided against this procedure, which means that when the ban comes into force, all Demeter farms will raise male chicks – if they are not already doing so.

THIS IN-OVO-SELECTION IS WELL ADVERTISED. I RECENTLY READ ON AN EGG CARTON “NOW THE WORLD IS ALL RIGHT AGAIN”.

Kathrin Goebel: Yes, that's right. Aldi is now a big player. However, a chicken hatches for only 21 days, that's not long. This in-ovo-selection requires quite advanced technological equipment, and that means that small hatcheries cannot afford such a technology. This will lead to even fewer small hatcheries. At the moment, the procedures determine the sex between day eleven and 14, which already over half of the hatching period. If you look at the chick, it even has little feathers and it already feels pain. This means that the egg is shredded, even though the chick is actually already in there. It's all about animal welfare, but if you look at sustainability, it's also a total humbug because millions of eggs – resources, as they say – are simply destroyed, and that's not a sustainable solution either.

If it would become possible to determine the gender at an earlier time, the eggs could go into industrial channels [processed food], like the cracked eggs. But then small- and middle-sized hatcheries would not have the chance to take-off. Companies that process the liquid egg only take large quantities. Even if you have your own farm store, like we do, you are not allowed to sell liquid eggs directly. We can process our cracked eggs in the lunches and baked goods in our café, but that is only because we have so few.

» The fact that they are outdoors a lot, get good feed, which is mixed freshly every week... I think is a good basis for animal health «

– Alexander Kern



Spotlight on HOF AM MÜHLGRUND



The Hofgut am Mühlgrund in the Odenwald, Hesse is a Bioland-certified farm owned by Alexander Kern and his family. They raise pigs, cows, chickens – both organic broiler chickens and over 340 laying hens together with their brother cockerels from a dual-purpose breed.

COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR FARM?

Alexander Kern: I manage the farm since 2018. In the 1980s, agriculture had been abandoned here and I am now building an animal husbandry from scratch here, especially with poultry, and pigs [and since 2021, cows]. We make our own feed here, keep laying hens, as well as pullets and 6 pigs currently. The chickens are free-range and stay overnight in mobile barns that are moved every week. We have two breeds on the farm, a breed for laying hens where the eggs are produced, where we also raise the brother cockerels. It is the dual-purpose breed Coffee & Cream from the ÖTZ. Then we have an organic hybrid breed solely for the meat. I receive day-old chicks every four weeks and they are just for the fattening line. These chicks are two weeks old and next week they move into the winter garden.



WHERE DO YOU GET THESE CHICKS FROM?

Alexander Kern: It is difficult to find organic chick hatcheries in Germany that supply for my size of farm every four weeks. The chicks are hatched in Austria, but the supplier has already adjusted to Southern Germany. Therefore, there is a pick-up station in Heilbronn, where I can pick up the chicks.

ARE THE CHICKS SEPERATED BY SEX?

Alexander Kern: You have to make a difference between the herds for fattening and the dual-purpose chickens. The male chickens for fattening don't become sexually mature at all. They would only start to become sexually mature at 15 to 16 weeks but are slaughtered at twelve weeks, thus they are raised together for the entire time. Hybrid breeds like mine grow more slowly – usually 90 days from day-old chicks to slaughter. Chicks from conventional farms grow for a maximum of 35 days before slaughter. The dual-purpose chicken, on the other hand, are raised together for the first weeks, then the roosters and hens are separated – the females as pullets, and the brother roosters go into fattening. With the brother cockerels fattening, you can actually only keep about two-thirds of the chickens in the coop because they just need the space. Otherwise, they become more aggressive and it can simply lead to injuries if you keep them too close.

HOW MANY EGGS DO HENS LAY PER YEAR?

Alexander Kern: The dual-purpose hens are at 230 eggs and a hybrid organic laying hen is at 300 eggs a year. That's where a price difference comes from. The annual cost of a hen is about the same, but you just divide by 300 eggs for hybrid organic layers and 230 eggs a year for dual-purpose organic layers. Chickens are high performers, and even if they lay fewer eggs, they lay a lot of eggs. It can lead to metabolic problems. I observe them most of the time, but there are times when an animal simply lies dead in the coop the next day, and then you just have to accept that. The fact that they are outdoors a lot, get good feed, which is mixed fresh every week, I think is a good basis for animal health. Otherwise, if for example, stock problems are there, then it will first be treated homoeopathically and then allopathically.

HOW OLD ARE THE LAYING HENS NOW?

Alexander Kern: They are a good two years old. They would have been slaughtered long ago, but I just wanted to bridge the time until the new laying hens arrive and that's why I decided not to have them slaughtered, just to let them continue laying. We are now only at the laying performance of about 50 percent. It is possible due to the Solawi, due to the fact that I could explain transparently and openly that everyone gets only 3-4 eggs per week. Since April 2019, it is the same chickens and in 6-7 weeks (Oct. '20) I get a barn for 300 laying hens, in order to meet the demand for ethically produced eggs. You already notice this topic dual-purpose chicken and I also raise the brother chicks – that is very important. I charge 60 cents per egg. That is a price where the chickens can be kept well, where I can live from and where I can also say 'yes, I bought a good egg'.

YOU SAID YOU PRODUCE THE FEED YOURSELF?

Alexander Kern: I try to do everything myself. Even to grind it myself. For instance, triticale, peas, field beans, oats, and barley are the individual components for the feed.

We have five different grain mixtures here for the different types of animals and this is simply mixed up with supplementary feed purchased from an organic feed mill. It's a slightly different feed for the laying hens than what's for the broilers. For the older broilers there is a larger proportion of oats in it and raw fiber, so that they are full. What is important is that the amino acids lysine and methionine are available in sufficient form, in addition to the classic energy and protein feed.



HOW DO YOU SELL YOUR DUAL-PURPOSE CHICKENS?

Alexander Kern: At the moment, the largest share is through a chicken project called the Chicken SoLaWi. It is basically an annual subscription because the hen is also about for a year here to lay eggs. You receive a 'chicken package' with the eggs of a laying hen for a year, and at the year-end a soup chicken and a brother cockerel. If you go to an organic supermarket nowadays, or even Rewe and Aldi, many will advertise that they raise the brother cockerels – but, where are they? Where do I get the meat from this brother cockerels? That is really untransparent. In 2019 the SoLaWi was very well received, so from 40 hens I have given away 32 shares. Of the new 300 laying hens, my goal is to allocate 150.

WHERE DO YOU SELL YOUR EGGS AND POULTRY?

Alexander Kern: We do not have a real farm store yet. But we are open on Saturdays from 10 am - 4 pm, and we sell chicken meat and when there are eggs leftover, we also sell eggs. The SoLaWi is, in fact, in addition to this sale of meat. The eggs basically go completely to SoLaWi, because there are just 20 eggs a day. Because there is simply a lack of regional structures for small farms where the meat can be cut, I decided to build our own room, where we can cut and pack the meat hygienically. We let slaughter and then they are cooled down here, cut up and then vacuumed. Since April for the first time, we slaughter every two weeks and we almost always sell out.

There are also regional resellers for the meat. There are two Edeka stores here or the farm store at Hofgut Oberfeld, because they tend to have laying hens. On advance order, customers can also pick up the meat at my home. The eggs can also be picked up every week at three pick-up depots. In the future, we are considering to also sell at markets, because it is just more open and can be even more regional. The eggs are sold quite fresh, but I try to store them for three or four days, because maturation takes place and after seven days the egg actually tastes best.

CHALLENGES COMPARED TO LARGE FARMS?

Alexander Kern: [The organic association] Bioland supports me through the regional group meetings, through its advice, through information, through conferences, opportunities to inform myself, but it also helps to understand guidelines better. The challenge is that every farm is different but uses one and the same guideline. It's important when you're turning a cog somewhere that you don't accidentally turn those interlocking cogs so that it misses an 'organic' criterion, thus you just have to do a lot of administrative research. One day a week, I'm easily in the office



WHERE WHY ARE YOUR ORGANIC EGGS BETTER THAN, FOR EXAMPLE, EU ORGANIC EGGS?

Alexander Kern: First of all, clearly because of the group size. In the EU laying hen sector there are up to 3,000 laying hens per coop and up to 24,000 laying hens per farm allowed. Since I have set myself the group size of a maximum of 500, I also think that it represents a completely different flock dynamic for the animal. Thus, I try to keep the animal welfare higher, while I can better oversee this flock as a single person. In the price comparison with the classic organic egg, my Bioland egg that costs 0.60 € has the advantage that I can keep my small farm size and raise dual-purpose chickens. In the farms that keep 24,000 or less laying hens, there are probably also 24,000 brother cocks shredded. I have the possibility to simply raise and market the brother cockerels as well. But that is a difference that I have to communicate elaborately.

On taste, if you do a blind tasting with organic meat and commercial meat with similar spices, it becomes very difficult to taste differences. But you don't just eat with your mouth. You also have your head and your eyes. For those who are interested and aware that when you eat meat, it comes from living animals, I already have the advantage through my transparent animal husbandry, which I practice here. I simply also offer that aspect to the customer who is looking for it.

»I don't like it when farmers are too dependent on large corporations, especially in breeding. Breeding is the basis of farming life, whether it's plants or animal husbandry.«
– Karl Schweisfurth



Spotlight on

HERMANNSDORFER LANDWERKSTÄTTEN



The Hermannsdorfer Landwerkstätten in Glonn, Bavaria are the centre of a network of more than hundred organic partner farmers and producers in the region. The main focus is the processing and marketing of organically produced plants and animals in the butchery, bakery, cheese dairy and brewery. They even breed their own chickens: the Hermannsdorfer country chicken. Karl Schweisfurth tells us its unique story.

COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CHICKENS?

Karl Schweisfurth With the chickens, we started ten years ago. The reason was that – even though I am a farmer – I realized for the first time that with the high-performance breeds, the hybrid breeds of the large breeding companies, the brothers of the laying hens are all shredded or gassed immediately after hatching. I was very shocked, but then I did some research and talked to our poultry supplier at the time about whether this could be changed. He claimed that: “You can't change that. That's the way it is.” I said to myself ‘this cannot be’ and I started to look for alternatives.

AND WHAT DID YOU FIND OUT?

Karl Schweisfurth: I noticed that the original pedigree chickens, that is, the chickens that can lay eggs and use meat were almost extinct. And that everything runs only through these few large breeding groups. I believed that we simply had to start over again by ourselves. I found a poultry breeder who had also already started over several years to breed pedigree poultry again, and then the first chickens came here in 2009. These were the ‘Sulmtaler chickens’, which is a breed from Austria.

Later we added the ‘Les Bleues’ Bresse chickens, which are the ones with the blue feet – that’s why they are called that way. On the basis of the two breeds – also by crossing these breeds – we then started with the chicken breeding.

WHAT WAS YOUR INSPIRATION?

We said that everything should go back into farmers’ hands. I don’t like it when farmers are too dependent on large corporations, especially in breeding. Breeding is the basis of farming life, whether it’s plants or animal husbandry. To give it away and only get chicks on order - that is not the idea of rural agriculture as I imagine it. That's why we said we'll do everything ourselves. We breed. That is not so difficult. Most farmers don’t even know that you can do that anymore. We bought incubators, where we put the eggs and then we do the chick rearing. The first weeks the hens and the roosters are together. After six to ten weeks, you can separate the sexes. We and some local partner farms raise the chickens. We stamp the eggs ourselves and sell them. We have a small slaughter room where we slaughter the chickens. The system is completely closed, and everything is together.

HOW DID YOU START THE BREEDING PROGRAMME?

Karl Schweisfurth: Ten years ago, everyone bought these hybrid chickens from the big companies. There are four companies worldwide that control 80 percent of the world's poultry. We have now the genetics in our own hands and that's something that I believe is right. Back then, everybody said that it won't work because many breeds are extinct or that it would be too expensive. Then we said: "Alright, we'll do this together with our customers". We asked our customers what they think of our idea, an alternative to the killing of the male chicks. People thought that it was good idea and then we said, "well, then please give us a loan with which we can finance it." The so-called "land chicken loan". The customers could lend us 300 euros with a maximum of five shares, thus 1,500 euros. We then invested the money in mobile barns, a slaughterhouse, an egg packing station, etc. In return, the customers received a voucher of 30 euros every year for ten years. In this way they got back their 300 euros loan. We found 800 people who lent us a total of about 700,000 euros with which we could make all the investments. The first ones already got their whole loan back.



What is also special is that we don't have the high-performance chickens, where we have to kill the brothers of the laying hens. Of course, the performance is lower. The fattening animals, which are specially bred for this, are ready in four weeks on the conventional farm. On the organic farm, depending on how intensively the organic farm works, the broilers are ready after two to maybe three months. With us they need four and a half to five months, so they grow much longer. But they also become a little heavier. The laying performance of our hens is at 200-210 eggs per year. With the intensive laying hybrids in the organic, hens lay about 280 to 290 eggs per year. Mathematically, this is also significantly lower. Naturally, this leads to the fact that our price must be higher, because the expenditure, particularly also the fodder expenditure, is then higher.



We make a dual-purpose cross with a 'Sulmtaler' father and a 'Les Bleues' mother. The Sulmtaler breed does not lay many eggs and does not grow so fast. The 'Les Bleues' breed is better, but it has a big disadvantage. It is very aggressive, and the roosters kill each other. That is not so good. If we cross the two, then we have peaceful animals that don't kill each other, but still have good performance. A good performance similar to the purebred 'Les Bleues'.

We have a group that are also partly purebred 'Sulmtaler' hens. They live together with the pigs that protect the chickens from hawks and foxes. The fattening chickens are together with the fattening pigs on the pasture. This is also nice here because the pigs burrow and the chickens find a worm. That's what we call symbiotic farming.

WHAT KIND OF FOOD DO THE CHICKENS GET?

Karl Schweisfurth: They receive grains, beans, and soy cakes. Otherwise, whatever grows out here, but they have to be fed, of course. They also eat scraps from the vegetable section of our store. From the bistro the vegetables, no meat. We have only feed from Bavaria. Regional is especially important with soy. If sourced from abroad, you can not exactly check whether it is really organic.

DID YOU HAVE PROBLEM DUE TO DUMPING PRICES BY DISCOUNTER SUPERMARKETS?

Karl Schweisfurth: No, because it's such a different quality. We have such a big community through the loan and people know the difference.

They know what is different with us than elsewhere and that is why they are willing to pay the higher price. They know how the chickens live and they can see them here. They know that brother cockerels are not killed, instead the 'brothers' are raised here. They know that we have our own breed of chickens. We also have fixed prices purchase guarantees with the partner farmers that they get for their animals, which we negotiate once a year.

DO YOU TAKE CARE OF ALL OF THOSE ANIMALS?

Karl Schweisfurth: Farming, yes. We still have a butcher shop, a bakery, a cheese dairy, a farm market and stores in Munich. I managed it all that together for 22 years. Now, I do the animal husbandry, and my niece does the other parts of the business together with her husband. So, it's all a family business.

» Every year, many small, farmer-owned businesses have to close down. As consumers, it is important to support small businesses through informed buying behaviour. « – Stephanie Lehmann



APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

1. Kathrin Goebel. Farm management / animal husbandry, cheese dairy and bakery. Hofgut Oberfeld Darmstadt. 03.08.2020
2. Kern, Alexander. Owner. Hofgut am Mühlgrund. 20.08.2020
3. Schweisfurth, Karl. Farm management / animal husbandry. Herrmannsdorfer Landwerkstätten Glonn GmbH & Co. KG. 02.09.2020.
4. Minkmar, Lisa. Public and press relations, Coordination office Rooster meat marketing. Bruderhahn Initiative Deutschland e.V. 21.09.20: Zoom [recorded]
5. Lehmann, Stephanie (Dr.). Project work / Press and public relations. Biokreis e.V. 30.09.20: Zoom [recorded]
6. Günther, Inga. Managing Director, Ökologische Tierzucht gemeinnützige GmbH. 31.10.20: Zoom [recorded]

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