

New Jersey

MONTHLY

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Sunnyside Up: Jersey's Egg Farm

At the last of Jersey's big family egg farms, the rural life is all it's cracked up to be.

By [Sharon Hazard](#) | February 21, 2014



A worker inspects Puglisi eggs for cracks via a process called candling. Photo by Marc Steiner/Agency New Jersey

Emmanuel Puglisi arrived in America from his native Sicily in 1937. Just 13, he already knew he wanted to follow the lead of his older brother, an earlier émigré who had started an egg farm in New Jersey. “Back home in Italy, I always liked birds,” recalls Puglisi, now 89.

Working for a furniture manufacturer in New York City, Puglisi saved his money and, by age 26, he purchased a farm in Howell on a rural strip named, of all things, Easy Street.

But life on the 17-acre farm was anything but easy for Puglisi. He built his own coops, purchased 2,500 chicks and waited for them to start laying. Soon began the long days of gathering, cleaning, candling, weighing and selling his hens' ovoid output.

Sixty-three years later, the Puglisi Egg Farm, expanded and modernized, produces 750,000 eggs a week and can claim to be the state's last family-run, large-scale egg business.

"At one time, there were seven egg farms within a quarter mile of each other on this street," says Puglisi's son, John, 57, who now runs the farm with his brothers, Michael, 56, and Paul, 53. "Now, we are the only ones left."

Indeed, egg farming has been steadily shrinking in the Garden State. In 2007, New Jersey had 1,367 egg farms with 1.6 million laying hens producing \$33.4 million in eggs, according to the most recent data from the National Agricultural Statistics Service. By 2012, the state's egg output had fallen so far that the service lumped in Jersey's numbers with seven other states.

The state's largest egg producer is Ise, a Japanese-owned company that established a farm in Washington Township in Warren County in 1985, later adding a Salem County location, Red Bird Egg Farm in Woodstown. Puglisi is the state's number-two producer.

In the growth years, egg farming in New Jersey was the province of immigrants from Italy, Russia, Germany, Poland and elsewhere in Europe. They settled in rural New Jersey before World War II and made the state a leading egg-producer.

Many of the farmers were immigrant Jews, able to purchase poultry farms through the generosity of European millionaire, Baron Maurice de Hirsch, who would lend applicants \$2,000 through his Jewish Agricultural Society to buy five acres of land, a house, chicken coops and a batch of chickens. In time, a small farmer with 2,000 chickens could expect an annual profit of \$4,000.

Jewish egg farming boomed in the years after World War II as Holocaust survivors tried their hands at rural life. At one point, 12,000 small-flock, family-owned egg farms dotted the state. By 1955, Jersey produced more than 485 million eggs, according to the state Department of Agriculture.

In the ensuing decades, most of the Jews and their fellow immigrant farmers moved on to other livelihoods. Not so the Puglisi family. After settling in Monmouth County, Emmanuel Puglisi met Mary, a young woman from Naples, Italy, working in the local hatchery. They soon married and began raising a family.

John, Michael and Paul were born on the farm and early on learned the rigors of raising chickens and selling eggs. "It's a way of life and very labor intensive," says John. "You have to have a passion for it."

When the boys were teenagers, their father asked each if he was interested in staying in the business.

They all agreed to give it a go. John and Michael graduated college, Paul finished high school, and one by one they became partners. The farm has 50 employees—including six third-generation Puglisis—and has expanded to 17 acres, anchored by a small red-brick office building adjacent to the production and warehouse areas.

“Things start revving up around 7:30 am,” says John as he leads a visitor around the grounds. That’s when the birds start laying and the production area gets ready for the assault of eggs tumbling from the hen house onto a high-speed egg grader, a 2-mile-long conveyor that wraps around the production room doing the work that was once done by hand.

Upon their arrival in the production area, the eggs are sterilized in a machine resembling a car wash. Next, the eggs are candled—the process of inspecting for imperfections. Each egg rolls through the incubator-like candler and is examined under a beam of light. A computerized crack detector finishes the job. Rejects are discarded.

Having passed muster, the eggs are sorted and sized in a \$2 million grading machine. “It’s just as vital as the laying hens, because it is volume that nets the profit,” says Emmanuel Puglisi. (The elder Puglisi retired in 1986, but he and Mary remain active in the business. Now 89, the man known to all as Manny walks to the farm every day from his modest home nearby to keep an eye on things.)

In the final step, the eggs are carefully sucked-up and packaged snugly in styrofoam cartons marked small, medium, large, extra large or jumbo. Some 2,000 cases per day (with 30 dozen eggs per case) are prepared for distribution. A fleet of 19 trucks, managed by Paul, delivers Puglisi Eggs from Maine to Virginia under various brands. They even ship pullet eggs to China, where these tiny gems from immature hens are considered delicacies.

“Years ago, what my father produced in an entire week, we now produce in less than an hour: 8,000 dozen eggs,” says John. The farm’s army of white leghorns is kept in three massive hen houses. (John would not disclose the exact number of layers.)

The hen houses boast airy, tiered cages with elevated slatted floors for waste disposal. The individual cubicles separate the egg-laying areas from the food and water dispensers to make for a more sanitary environment. Here the staff monitors the birds, tracking water intake, sleep patterns and their diet of mixed grains. “These animals are our bread and butter, so we try to care for them the best we can,” says Paul, the operations manager. (Although their diets are not strictly organic, Puglisi birds are fed no chemicals or hormones.)

Manny Puglisi was the first in the country to utilize these state-of-the-art hen houses in 1970, the family claims. Indeed, Manny kept investing in new technology in the 1960s as other farmers were closing up their coops. “Egg production was moving down south where labor was cheaper and to the corn belt in the Midwest where the grain was produced,” says John.

Few descendants of Jersey’s egg-farming pioneers were able to follow in their parents’ footsteps. Ronald Becker, head of special collections and university archives at Rutgers University Alexander Library, grew up on a chicken farm in Vineland started by his father, a Holocaust survivor. He remembers the hard work of gathering, cleaning, candling, weighing and sorting the eggs with the help of a Jersey invention called the Egomatic (see story below). His family’s farm had 12,000 chickens in its heyday, but they sold to a developer in 1975. “The land was worth more than the chickens,” Becker says.

In many immigrant families, staying in the business was a sign of failure, Becker says. “Their idea of the future was to make enough money to send their children to college so they could become professionals.”

The late painter and sculptor George Segal lived on his family’s South Brunswick egg farm with his wife, Helen, from the 1950s until his death in 2000. Giving up egg farming, he turned the coops into his studio when he became a full-time artist.

Retired engineer Jerry Rubin of Summit remembers growing up on his family’s 100-acre farm in South Brunswick. After-school chores consisted of feeding the chickens and processing eggs by hand. The farm is long gone, he says, replaced by “a development of stately Tudor-style homes.”

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