

**Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
Kootenay Co-op Radio
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Title: Local Food Fraud?: An Investigation

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Jon Steinman: And welcome to Deconstructing Dinner a syndicated radio show and podcast produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio, CJLY. I'm Jon Steinman and on today's episode – a special behind-the-scenes investigative report that takes an in-depth look into *alleged* local food fraud...

With the rapid rise in interest among North Americans to support locally produced food and with the premium people are willing to *pay* for that food, it leaves open an attractive opportunity for food-based businesses to take advantage of this new and growing lucrative market either honestly or not.

In May 2010, Deconstructing Dinner received a tip from a farmer in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia who alleged that a local business who sells eggs to 18 retailers and restaurants in the area and who was marketing their product as being predominantly from their own farm was not true. According to the tip, the “farm” was not a farm at all, and housed no chickens on the property.

The business has also been marketing their product as originating from neighbouring farms in the Creston Valley, however, we received yet *another* and very strong tip, this one in July, alleging that that that too might also, not entirely be true.

Increase Music and Fade Out

On August 19, 2010, the Food and Drug Administration in the United States issued a nationwide recall of eggs – the largest recall of its kind in history. In the following days, over half a billion eggs were recalled all of them having originated at just two factory farms.

Despite the size and scale of the recall, for many people, the incident is of no surprise, and just a further reminder as to why so many people are increasingly choosing to access eggs from farms they know or are even going so far as to produce them themselves, in their backyards.

But just as we examined back on our May 6, 2010 episode, those options are too, quite threatened. In the case of backyard chickens, we examined the crack-down by the Nelson Police Department here in the hometown of Deconstructing Dinner – when in December of 2009 and

June of this year, bylaw enforcement officers threatened two separate residents with fines unless they removed their illegal chickens from their properties.

Deconstructing Dinner also focused its attention on the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the CFIA, who in April of this year and acting on a complaint, visited about a dozen retailers in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. The complaint alerted the CFIA to the presence of ungraded eggs on the shelves of area stores. An ungraded egg is an egg that has *not* passed through a grading station registered with Agriculture & Agri Food Canada. Grading involves sanitizing the eggs with detergents, and then determining the grade of the eggs by checking the condition of the shell, the size of the air cell, and whether the yolk is centered. Most of the eggs ending up on the dinner plates of Canadians pass through only a handful of industrial-scale grading stations set up within each province, but some smaller operations do exist.

Now despite the CFIA *allowing* ungraded eggs to be sold at the farm gate and at farmers markets, they do *not* permit those very same eggs to be sold in stores and restaurants. Seeming as hypocrisy, we posed that question on that May 6 episode when we interviewed a Food Processing Specialist Inspector *with* the CFIA who informed us that the reason for that allowance is that purchasing directly from the farmer can assure the public of where their eggs are coming from.

But where are those *graded* eggs coming from?

As part of that April 2010 crack-down on retailers who were selling ungraded eggs, one of those businesses visited by the CFIA was Nature's Den in the community of Rossland. Similar to many businesses across the country, ungraded eggs had been sold on their shelves for many years, if not decades, without incident. And with so many farmers having developed comfortable relationships *with* those businesses, most retailers were left without many options as to where they might purchase *graded* eggs that were not coming from factory-farms. Nature's Den's co-owner Sid Tayal asked that very question to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's, David Mutch, who paid them that visit in April. Sid's partner Bonny Kavaloff shared that interaction with Deconstructing Dinner.

Jon Steinman

And so at this point do you have any other options as far as accessing eggs?

Bonny Kavaloff

No.

Jon Steinman

No and you've looked into that or?

Bonny Kavaloff

No. I haven't looked into it because he said if we are going to get fined and shut our business down, no. Well actually yes. I'm sorry. The access to eggs is from a place outside of Creston who does have an inspected place.

Jon Steinman

Okay.

Bonny Kavaloff

Yes. That's. Yes.

Jon Steinman

So, that would be the option?

Bonny Kavaloff

Yes and I'm not interested. I'd rather do the local stuff.

Jon Steinman

Yeah and how were you made aware of them?

Bonny Kavaloff

Apparently David, that government guy told Sid about him.

Jon Steinman

Okay.

Bonny Kavaloff

Yeah

JS: The CFIA inspector was referring to one of two registered egg grading stations in the region: Eggs R Uz.

The grading station is based in the community of Wynndel located in the Creston Valley of the Province and according to them, sells their eggs into 18 stores and restaurants located in the Creston Valley, along Kootenay Lake and in the City of Nelson. The business communicates to their customers that their eggs originate on their own farm and that they also receive *some* eggs from some small farms in the Creston Valley.

But for the CFIA inspector to recommend Eggs R Uz as a local option to Nature's Den raises an eyebrow, because Eggs R Uz is also the business who many farmers believe was the complainant who alerted the CFIA to the presence *of* ungraded eggs on the shelves of area retailers. Now there's no evidence to confirm that allegation, *but*, our research into the business has revealed at least two confirmed cases in the past few years when Eggs R' Uz did indeed complain about the presence of ungraded eggs on store shelves – once to the CFIA and another complaint to an area grocery store.

But the allegations did not stop there. In early May Deconstructing Dinner received a tip from a farmer who chooses to remain anonymous suggesting that Eggs R Uz does not have any chickens. In fact, that very farmer took a drive *by* the operation to take a look. Based on that visit, that farmer informed us that he saw *no* chickens on the property.

Now with the implications of such an allegation being significant, I called up Eggs R Uz to learn more about their business and inquire into *where* their eggs are coming from.

Heide Stang

Okay. It's my husband and myself. We have an egg grading station. We collect our eggs regular. Wash them immediately. Rinse them. Put them in coolers. Our main concern is good looking eggs for the safety of the public. We supply quite a few stores, about fourteen in the Creston area, down the lake, and in Nelson. What else can I tell you?

Jon Steinman

Where do your eggs come from?

Heide Stang

From the chickens! Ha ha ha. I got you there.

Jon Steinman

Do you have your own chickens?

Heide Stang

Yes we do.

Jon Steinman

Okay, so. What type of percentage... are most of them coming from your own farm and how large is your own farm and operation?

Heide Stang

We got two and a half acres of run and almost five acres total. We have three different barns. Our chickens are well watered. We have got two creeks on either side of the property. They are well fed, well housed, their bedding is kept clean, nests are kept clean. Husbandry for chickens is of the utmost importance.

Jon Steinman

Would these be referred to as free range these chickens?

Heide Stang

Oh, heavens yes.

Jon Steinman

And then so are all of your eggs coming from your own farm. Do you access eggs from elsewhere?

Heide Stang

We have some small little growers, of course they can't sell them in the store and they'll bring them in and we'll grade them.

JS: That's Heide Stang of Eggs R Uz. Despite Eggs R Uz stating that they do indeed have chickens and that some of their eggs come from other small farms in the Creston Valley, it came as a shock when we received *another* anonymous tip – from *another* and very confident source – that not only were there no chickens on the property, but according to this person, Eggs R Uz is purchasing eggs from someone who drives in from Alberta.

Of course Deconstructing Dinner had to be sure and find out for *ourselves* just what was going on this property, because if the allegations are true, then clearly the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is either not aware of where the eggs are from, or not aware that the business is communicating to their customers that their eggs are coming exclusively from their own farm and from neighbouring farms.

Sure enough, the property on which Eggs R Uz operates is currently for sale, and so, I scheduled an appointment to check the property out and take a look around.

On my way there, I stopped at three stores who sell Eggs R Uz eggs to get their take on where the eggs are coming from.

Jon Steinman

I'm looking to see what kind of eggs you have. Are those eggs from Wynndel are they from chickens in Creston or is it just a company that sells eggs?

Retailer #1

They have a farm and then they also get eggs from locals, all local farms.

Jon Steinman

It's all from Creston farms?

Retailer #1

Yeah.

Jon Steinman

Okay.

Jon Steinman

Those eggs from the Eggs R Uz place are those from chickens in the valley or is it just a business?

Retailer #2

Yeah from Wynndel.

Jon Steinman

Yeah?

Retailer #2

Yeah from Wynndel.

Jon Steinman

Thanks.

Retailer #2

Welcome.

Jon Steinman

Do you know if the eggs that are in the fridge there are those from chickens here from the valley?

Retailer #3

Yeah.

Jon Steinman

Yeah, they are local?

Retailer #3

Yeah. They are. Do you want a bag for this?

JS: Well clearly, retailers in the area are under the impression that the eggs are coming from their own farm and in some cases from farmers in the Creston Valley.

When I arrived in Wynndel and the home of Eggs R Uz, there was no sign of any chickens, no sound of any chickens, no smell of any chickens and no sign that there had been any chickens on the property at least in the past year. Down below from where I stood, there *was* a small barn, but first Heide and Joe Stang invited me *inside* the house, I also asked them if I could videotape the tour and they agreed. What you'll hear here, is the audio from that visit, and posted on the Deconstructing Dinner web site – a video that captures what I was about to see.

Jon Steinman

Hi there. I spoke with Joe yesterday.

Heide Stang

Come on in.

Jon Steinman

Should I take my boots off?

Joe Stang

Take him on a tour.

Heide Stang

You take him on a tour.

Joe Stang

No, you are better at it.

Heide Stang

This room we are still going to do some work on it. This is the last room for us to do. This is what we call our office. And there is storage here. We've already had a yard sale to get rid of some of our stuff. We're into eggs, so these are egg boxes.

JS: In one of the rooms I visited on the tour, I noticed a pile of empty egg boxes located in the back corner. The boxes were labeled Wholesome Farms – a brand of eggs sold by Sysco Foodservice – one of the largest foodservice companies in North America and one of many brands which in the United States was recalled as part of the August 2010 salmonella egg recall. Now it's not *uncommon* for farmers to reuse boxes from industrial egg producers, but, with the allegations that Deconstructing Dinner had received, and with what was appearing at that point to be an *absence* of chickens on the property, I took note of the boxes with my video camera in hand. Further research on the product number listed on the side of those boxes indicates that in British Columbia, that product is produced from chickens housed in battery cages and originates from Golden Valley Foods – the largest egg producer in the province. That possibility seems likely, when many people including myself have testified to the yolk of the eggs from Eggs R Uz often falling apart when cracked open, being of a very pale colour, and in one case when I purchased those eggs, one of the eggs yolks was fluorescent.

When those boxes were visible, Heide Stang commented that they are in the egg business, which prompted me to inquire a little more into Eggs R Uz.

Jon Steinman

I saw you had farm tax status. And I did a search and I noticed you're on the Creston Farm Fresh Guide. Is that what it is, Creston Valley Farm Fresh Guide.

Heide Stang

Yeah.

Jon Steinman

So, that's the business you operate here.

Heide Stang

Yep.

Jon Steinman

But that's not part of this?

Heide Stang

I didn't think it would be feasible to sell as a business. And this is the pantry.

JS: The subject of my question into the possible sale of the business was quickly shifted to another, only moments later I was prompted again to ask another important question... that with the property claiming farm status for tax purposes, and seemingly no farming taking place there, where were those chickens?

Jon Steinman

So you aren't doing any farm production right now?

Joe Stang

Oh sure we are.

Jon Steinman

Yeah?

Joe Stang

Yeah, we've got chickens and eggs.

Jon Steinman

Oh yeah. Like on the property?

Joe Stang

We have them moved down below right now because I'm trying to get this top off.

JS: "Down below" as Joe Stang indicates was presumably the barn located below the house, but Heidi quickly took me into their walk-in cooler.

Heide Stang

This is the walk in cooler, also will double as a freezer.

JS: Located just outside the cooler were empty and broken down egg boxes of that same Wholesome Farms brand of eggs, and some more boxes these ones larger holding 30-dozen eggs located just outside the cooler and labeled Sparks Farms, a company producing 50% of Alberta's egg production all from one 110-acre facility in Calgary. Inside the cooler, more boxes filled with eggs, and recognizably the ones sent to area retailers. Those boxes held 15-dozen eggs and while originally labeled as a Sparks Farm brand of egg, the boxes had been relabeled with the Eggs R Uz logo. According to their customers who purchase eggs in bulk, those were the boxes that they receive each delivery.

Heide then guided me into their egg grading station – a small room with a counter-top, wooden cupboards below, a sink, a refrigerator that wasn't being used, two small scales and some shelves holding styrofoam egg cartons with the Eggs R Uz sticker affixed to each one.

Heide Stang

And we've got an egg grading station in here. It's not very elaborate. But it passes Agri-Canada. Here is our dishwasher. It's got its own hot water heater".

Jon Steinman

So people come and actually buy from here too. Do you do any of that?

Heide Stang

We have got full-time eighteen customers and they don't often come to the house.

Jon Steinman

Oh, businesses you mean.

Heide Stang

We've got our established route. We are going tomorrow as a matter of fact. All those eggs go tomorrow.

Jon Steinman

You do your own deliveries and everything.

Heide Stang

Oh, we can't afford not to.

JS: After the tour of the walk-in cooler and the egg-grading station, it was time to step aside and see if those chickens were, as stated, anywhere on the property. To make sure that I was made well aware that I was viewing the entire property, I asked Joe Stang to point out the four property lines.

He made no mention of the barn just below and made no motion to take me in that direction, and so I invited myself.

Jon Steinman

And how far back, is that part of the property or is that a neighbour?

Joe Stang

No, that goes down and comes across and you see the fence go on down.

Jon Steinman

Yeah, and then the barn that was what was mentioned in the property listing?

Joe Stang

Yeah. That's just there. You saw that didn't you?

Jon Steinman

I saw that. Yeah.

Joe Stang

Yeah. That's down there.

Jon Steinman

Am I able to take a look?

Joe Stang

You can have a look. It's not clean right now and I have to take this out.

Jon Steinman

How`s the soil here, do you know?

Joe Stang

This should all be good, it`s got chicken manure on it for the last four years.

Jon Steinman

Yeah.

Joe Stang

I`m just trying to get it level. The chickens dug it up and there are holes and everything.

Jon Steinman

So it must be great then.

Joe Stang

Mm-Hmm.

Jon Steinman

So you had them running around here?

Joe Stang

Here and all the way down to the trees.

Jon Steinman

And your water, do you have a creek that runs through here?

Joe Stang

There is a creek that runs down that side through there. And there is one that runs right along the fence here.

JS: Just to make sure I was on the same property that Heide Stang spoke of when I interviewed her back in May, I inquired into the two creeks that she had mentioned run alongside the property. Joe Stang confirmed that this was indeed that same property. The grass on which the chickens had supposedly been on, also provided no indication that there had been chickens on it in any recent time. Instead, all I could see on the property were two peacocks and their babies. And Joe took me inside the barn.

Joe Stang

That`s where she`s in. I still got the nests in these ones for the chickens, the rest I`m kind of pulling apart. Here I`m trying to clean up. I`ll turn that other light on, I`ll let you go in here. My timers are still on for the chickens. Fifteen hours of light. I just pulled the nests all off. I had two rows of nests going down here.

Jon Steinman

Great, is it a pretty good business to be in?

Joe Stang

Oh, the chickens. Oh Shit. This is the grain room I kept the grain in here.

So it's big enough if a person wants to store stuff or raise chickens again.

JS: As expected, there was no sign of chickens in the barn and no indication that there was any intention to ever have chickens again.

And as we left the barn, Joe Stang made a passing comment that only later became quite curious as to the possible origins of their eggs. You see Eggs R Uz's largest customer by far is the Kootenay Co-operative Food Store in Nelson – a store who seeks to support local producers whenever it can. Known locally as The Co-op, the store has been purchasing seventy-two hundred eggs from Eggs R Uz every two weeks, and is almost always receiving those eggs in the 15-dozen boxes we saw in the walk-in cooler. But outside that cooler, were empty 30-dozen boxes labeled as being from Alberta's Sparks Farms. Take a listen to this comment.

Joe Stang

The coop takes 20 boxes of 30-dozen every 2 weeks.

JS: Upon reflection, it appears that when Joe Stang thinks of the Co-op as a customer, he thinks in terms of the 30-dozen boxes from Alberta that we witnessed on their property and *not* the 15-dozen boxes, which, according to the Kootenay Co-op Food Store, is almost *always* what they receive.

Certainly, there was something not right going on this property, to not only tell Deconstructing Dinner back in May that they *do* have chickens when clearly they do not and to then again make that same statement while I was right there on the property in August, by all accounts, a tall tale appears to be getting told.

When I returned from my visit to Eggs R Uz, I checked in with Kootenay Co-op and spoke with Cindy King who describes their store's egg suppliers, the volume of eggs they sell, and how much the store pays for eggs each year.

Cindy King: Oh. We sell a variety of eggs. We've sold from different sources. We've sold eggs through Pro Organics and SunOpta. Those are eggs, organic certified eggs. Free range eggs from the coast, Chilliwack area. For the past three years we have primarily been carrying eggs supplied by Eggs R Uz, from Wynndel, which is a local source. They come in bulk-flats and customers fill their own containers. On average we sell about three hundred dozen eggs per week. That market is worth about eighty thousand dollars a year.

JS: Similar to all of the retailers we spoke with who have been selling Eggs R Uz eggs, the Kootenay Co-op was too under the impression that the eggs they have been purchasing were coming from Eggs R Uz's farm in Wynndel and some eggs from nearby farms in the Creston Valley.

Cindy King: Eggs R Uz has given written confirmation that the eggs are from their farm and from other local farms in the area, in the Wynndel area. That the eggs are all free range and free run which means that the chickens either have access to outside meadows and those kinds of things or else are kept in large enclosed penned areas but none of the chickens have been caged and also that the feed is conventional. It is not, it does not contain any medications, no hormones, no animal byproducts, and we have a listing of the feed that they used they supplied us with.

JS: When we received that second allegation back in July that Eggs R Uz was purchasing eggs from someone coming from Alberta. I checked in with the Kootenay Co-op, again Eggs R Uz's largest customer and in July 2010, the Co-op made an effort to revise their product statement and sent Eggs R Uz an email that read this:

"Every few years, we go through suppliers statements and update them. I'll need you to update yours, as the last one we have from you is March 2007.

Specifically we need to know:

Number one, the living conditions of your chickens (free range, fenced or caged).

Number two, the feed that the chickens eat and including ingredient labels from feed bag.

Number three, the use, or not, of medications and hormones.

And number four, whether or not they are fed any animal byproducts."

Heide Stang of Eggs R Uz replied that same day with a brief statement, and it read this:

"Attached a feed label. The birds are free range, at no time are they medicated or fed hormones, no animal byproducts ever, sincerely Heide".

Attached to the email was an image of the feed label that she stated is what they feed their birds. It read, Sunset Seed Feed Division, 17% Egg Layer Ration (now this is a business located in Creston).

Despite Deconstructing Dinner becoming well aware that there are no chickens on the property of Eggs R Uz, we called up Sunset Seed anyway, to find out more about the product.

Sunset Seed Telephone Operator

Good afternoon, Sunset.

Jon Steinman

Hi there, I am calling from Nelson and I have a quick question about a product. I have a label here, Sunset Seed Company Feed Division. It says 17% Egg Layer Ration, is that a product that you are still selling?

Sunset Seed Telephone Operator

No, because actually our seed mill burnt down and now we just carry Master Seed.

Jon Steinman

Okay, so how long ago would this product have been sold?

Sunset Seed Telephone Operator

Since we burnt down, so not last December but the one before.

soundbite

JS: In a communication between the Kootenay Co-op and Eggs R Uz, Eggs R Uz has stated that *all* of the farmers supplying the Kootenay Co-op are using that feed – a product that has not been in production since December of 2008.

Now we heard earlier recordings from my visit to three retailers in the region – all of whom are convinced that the eggs they purchase are coming from Eggs R Uz’s own farm.

When I returned from my trip to Eggs R Uz, I also followed up with some *more* stores on the Eastern Shores of Kootenay Lake.

Store #1

Good afternoon.

Jon Steinman

I just wanted to know what kind of eggs you sell.

Store #1

We sell the Overwaitea Eggs and we sell the ones from an organic farm.

Jon Steinman

Are those the ones from the Eggs R Uz place?

Store #1

Yeah.

Jon Steinman

Do you know if those eggs are from chickens in Wynndel or in the Creston Valley?

Store #1

I think Wynndel.

Jon Steinman

Okay.

Store #1

Okay.

Jon Steinman

Great thanks, bye-bye.

Jon Steinman

Yeah, I just wanted to check if you sell eggs.

Store #2

Eggs, yes we do.

Jon Steinman

What kind of eggs are you selling?

Store #2

We have store bought, we have store eggs, and we have fresh free run eggs.

Jon Steinman

Are those the ones from Eggs R Uz?

Store #2

Yeah, from Wyndell.

Jon Steinman

So, those are all from chickens from Wyndell?

Store #2

Yep.

Jon Steinman

Thanks!

Store #2

Alrighty.

Jon Steinman

Bye.

JS: Also upon my return I sat down with a restaurant located in Nelson who has also been a customer of Eggs R Uz and he too assumed the eggs were coming from their own farm and had also been told that all of them were coming from farms in the Creston Valley. The owner of the restaurant has chosen to remain anonymous.

Jon Steinman

Maybe you could tell me a little bit about your egg supplier, Eggs R Uz?

Restaurant Owner

They are out of Creston. Joe and Heidi own the place. They have been consistent steady supplier of quality eggs with us for a couple years now. They are not our exclusive supplier but we get most of our eggs from them and we have been quite happy with them.

Jon Steinman

O.K. and what have you been communicated as far how the chickens are raised where the eggs are coming from?

Restaurant Owner

I've been told that they are all free range eggs and no caged eggs. No caged birds and all from suppliers in the area, basically. You know, following in the hundred mile diet, kind of. They are all well cared for and happy chickens. Happy chickens make happy eggs.

Jon Steinman

Have you been told that they have their own farm at all? Are they raising their own chickens as well?

Restaurant Owner

I haven't been specifically told one way or another. I think as far as I understand they have other farmers that supply them and I don't know if they have their own eggs themselves, but I always assumed they did but I don't know that for a fact.

soundbite

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner – a syndicated radio show and podcast produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio, CJLY. I'm Jon Steinman. This show is heard on 39 radio stations across the country and all of our episodes are archived on-line at deconstructingdinner.ca.

On today's show, we're featuring an exclusive behind-the-scenes investigative report focusing on a business who has long been communicating to their customers that the product they sell, eggs, is a product of their own farm and their own chickens and that they receive *some* eggs from neighbouring farms in the Creston Valley, but as we later discovered upon visiting the supposed farm, there *are* no chickens.

Our investigation was first sparked by a tip from a farmer who chooses to remain anonymous, that the business, Eggs r Uz, had no chickens. We then called up Eggs R Uz's Heide Stang over the phone back in May following that tip, and in a recorded interview she assured us that they do indeed have chickens.

And so we left that tip to rest until receiving yet another, and this time from another and very confident source, alleging that not only do they not have chickens, but that the eggs appear to be coming from *Alberta*, no where near the Creston Valley. When the property on which the business operates went up for sale, I scheduled an appointment, and my video footage compiled during that visit clearly shows that there are no chickens and that there are a lot of egg boxes that originated from Alberta's *largest* egg producer – Sparks Farms - a company who produces 50% of Alberta's egg production on one 110-acre facility in Calgary. I also saw just as many boxes from another brand – Wholesome Farms, a private label brand sold to restaurants by Sysco Foodservice and a product coming from battery caged hens.

Now while it's not uncommon for farmers to reuse those types of boxes for their own eggs, it's clear that Eggs R Uz was not communicating accurate information to us nor to their customers, and with such practices, it seems that the allegation that the eggs are originating from Alberta might indeed be true. Deconstructing Dinner has already alerted the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to this story, and they have begun to investigate the claims that their eggs are from their own farm and the claims that the rest of their eggs come from farms in the Creston Valley.

soundbite

JS: Perhaps most shocking, is how our focus onto this company all began, if you're just tuning in and missed the background on this story, it began back in April when the Canadian Food Inspection Agency received a complaint that ungraded eggs were being sold in stores throughout the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. About a dozen stores were then paid a visit by the CFIA and informed that the farm-fresh eggs on their shelves needed to be removed from the store or fines would be issued. Despite so many Canadians choosing to purchase farm fresh eggs because they trust them more than those coming from *factory*-farms, Canadian regulations do state that any eggs that do *not* pass through a registered grading station are only allowed to be sold at the farm gate or at farmers markets (not at grocery stores and not at restaurants). According to the CFIA who we interviewed for that initial May 6, 2010 broadcast, the reason that they allow farm gate and farmers market sales is because then the customer can know exactly who they're getting their eggs from, a pretty hollow reason that clearly has nothing to do with food safety. But that's where this story takes a rather ironic turn because one of those businesses visited in April by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) was Nature's Den in the City of Rossland. Just like dozens of businesses in the region, Nature's Den had long been offering eggs to their customers from a nearby farm. When they were told they could no longer sell them, the CFIA inspector informed co-owner Sid Tayal that one of the only place in the region to purchase eggs was *Eggs R Uz* – one of only two registered grading stations in that part of British Columbia.

Regardless of whether or not the CFIA was aware of what Deconstructing Dinner has uncovered, area farmers are now outraged that the CFIA would seek to eliminate established markets for small-scale farmers in the region, and at the very same moment promote a business who is misleading their customers as to the origins of their eggs. In fact many farmers in the region believe that that April 2010 crack-down on ungraded eggs was initiated because of a complaint filed by Eggs R Uz. Now we should stress that Deconstructing Dinner cannot confirm those allegations, but we can confirm why some farmers believe that. For one, farmers in the Creston Valley are well aware that two years ago Eggs R Uz complained about ungraded eggs being on the shelves of a local retailer. That store later received a visit by the CFIA and those ungraded eggs were removed. And also enduring a similar experience was farmer Jeremy Lack who years ago, was producing eggs for sale to local retailers. I sat down with Jeremy and asked him if *he* thinks Eggs R Uz initiated that April crack-down on ungraded eggs.

Jeremy Lack: Yeah, I think that is likely, you can't prove it, but that's likely. And the reason I say that is because when we were doing a reasonable number of eggs, three to four years ago. We were selling into Evergreen and Eggs R Uz were delivering eggs to them as well. They

made a complaint, Eggs R Uz, to Kit the owner at the time that they shouldn't be selling our eggs and their eggs at the same place. She was told if they continued, they would cease to deliver to her. She continued to buy our eggs because she is very supportive of local eggs. So no, it doesn't surprise me whatsoever if that's the sort of attitude that they took in those days. If they are making more and more money by buying eggs from outside and just taking them, what they are buying them at 2 dollars and selling them for what 4.50 - 5 dollars. Jeez. That's really nice farming.

JS: Jeremy Lack farms at Mad Dog Farm located in the community of Tarrys just outside the City of Castlegar. Jeremy is also the Chairman of the Kootenay Local Agricultural Society – an organization who manages a local label known as Kootenay Mountain Grown – the label is designed to assure people in the region that that product is indeed local and grown using organic principles. Their method of certification involves farmer-to-farmer inspections.

As mentioned, Deconstructing Dinner has produced a short video which shares footage from our visit to Eggs R Uz as well as additional audio compiled during our investigation. I shared this video with Jeremy Lack and as we watched it he made some interesting observations, first, that the grass upon which Joe Stang indicated chickens had been running on in recent years, did not, according to Jeremy, appear to have had any chickens on it at any recent time.

Jeremy Lack: I'm remembering that we actually used to keep chickens, quite a lot of chickens. Our method of disposing of the bedding was basically we used wood-chip which is the cheapest way of doing bedding around here. In the fall we used to spread it on the fields because at that time it was cheap. It was good feed for the pasture. Or we used to compost it and use it on the fields, right. So, always in the spring or by the end of the year following with wood chippings, there would always be unbroken down wood chippings in the grass. The grass would be really lush and quite thick because chicken manure has very high nitrogen content. It is very hot manure. That grass is underfed and shows no evidence of being fertilized properly in the last three to four years anyway. Even if they composted it and put it on there, there would always be some sort of un-decomposed woodchips left. If they were using straw, which would have been very expensive and I doubt they would've done it then there would be dried out bits of straw because it also doesn't always break down. There is no evidence at all that it is being fertilized.

JS: While it's clear from our visit and our video footage that not *one* chicken lives on the property, Jeremy Lack also observed that even if they did once have chickens, they wouldn't have been able to raise more than 200 in the size of the barn that we shot footage of and would have had to significantly subsidize their volumes from other farms.

Jeremy Lack: By the time you take out the space for the grain store. By the time you take out the space for this, that, and the other, which obviously never had birds in because birds make a mess, and you can see it on concrete. If they had two hundred birds at any one time, I would be really surprised, assuming a normal production, it would be lucky if they got one hundred and sixty to one hundred and eighty eggs a day in that sort of facility. I don't see any lights there for the birds anyway. They would probably shut down in the winter but assuming they put lights up for the birds they could only produce it for maximum ten months because the birds have to molt and they stop laying while they are molting.

You can work out pretty much what they theoretically could have had in terms of how many birds they would've had to keep to have sales at such and such a level. You tell me how many eggs they were selling on a weekly basis and I can tell you how many birds they would've had to keep to get it. You know, 80-90% lay capacity.

JS: Now what we do know is that Eggs R Uz's largest customer, the Kootenay Co-op Food Store in Nelson, had been purchasing 3 600 eggs every week and that Eggs R Uz maintains another 17 full-time customers. Assuming that those other 17 customers who are all small stores and restaurants are selling roughly the same amount of eggs sold at The Co-op combined, Jeremy Lack believes that there would need to be well over 1 000 chickens somewhere else in the Creston Valley to substantiate Eggs R Uz' claim that their eggs are also coming from other farms.

Also surprising to Jeremy was our footage of Eggs R Uz's grading station itself, which, despite the Canadian Food Inspection Agency having recommended Eggs R Uz as source of eggs to area retailers, Jeremy was not left convinced that what *he* saw in the footage would pass the stringent requirements laid out for such a facility.

Jeremy Lack: I seriously doubt that this place has ever been inspected by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency because looking at the film of the egg packing station. Three years ago, we decided to try to build one for the Kootenay Local Agriculture Society based on and using the stainless steel shipping containers, forty foot ones, so that we could have a couple scattered around the area. The regulations requiring everything to be stainless steel and every surface has to be washable and everything has to be sterilizable. Central drains and the whole works. You are looking at twenty to thirty thousand dollars' worth of stuff in there, to put in there to actually qualify as a grading station. That place wouldn't qualify based on the regulations that we would be required to follow. I don't understand how the hell they were able to get away with it.

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner. If you've missed any of today's broadcast, you can listen to an archived version on-line at deconstructingdinner.ca

When Jeremy Lack finished viewing our video of footage from our August 23rd visit to Eggs R Uz and when it became clear that they had no chickens on the property, he was more than upset. He believes it's these types of practices that *truly* damage the viability of small-scale agriculture.

JS: What's your initial reaction to the video and the footage you have just seen?

Jeremy Lack: I think it's absolutely appalling. One of the problems with the local label is that there is no control over it. The new sort of organic label if you like, that what drives local purchases. That's what drives purchases from local farmers. And to have people abusing it so obviously is just, I think it is quite disgusting. I just, as a local farmer, it's people like this that do so much freaking damage to the market for the rest of us.

JS: According to Jeremy, when Eggs R Uz *first* began selling eggs in the region, they marketed their product as organic and it was the volume of eggs that they were selling that made it very

difficult for farmers like Jeremy to make a go at producing organic eggs. I also asked Jeremy to comment on the April 2010 crack down on ungraded eggs on stores shelves initiated by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Jeremy Lack: We used to do eggs ourselves one of the reasons we stopped doing organic eggs is we always had a problem in maintaining the birds all the way through the year. Buying organic feed continuously, because with organic birds, once you feed them conventional food they are lending to be conventional birds okay. We did four, oh crackey, probably six years of new batches of chickens every year and every single year we are able to start them off organic and then they ran out of organic food. Birds still need to be fed, you feed them straight conventional food and then you've lost the organic premium if you like and it then becomes unworkable at a small scale.

When Eggs R Uz started up I couldn't understand where they were getting their organic feed from because when they ran out in the local area we used to have to run over to Creston. And that was one of the reasons why we eventually basically gave up because a) we couldn't compete with them because they were bringing in eggs, selling eggs at a price we couldn't compete with by buying food locally. And, they never seemed to run out of organic feed, so we assumed they were buying it in the truckload, right, which we couldn't afford to do, not just us, but other people as well. As a consequence, I am seriously, seriously, pissed.

JS: Now when this story first began at least this business first came on the radar of Deconstructing Dinner was around April 2010 when the Canadian Food Inspection Agency was going around to area retailers asking them to pull ungraded eggs off of store shelves. Since then, there are a number of farmers in the area who have lost their market. How does now seeing this as being really one of the only options if not the only option to get eggs at least from a regional business how does that, I guess, change your perspective on the crackdown back in April? Or does it?

Jeremy Lack: I think the crackdown was absolutely pathetic, small farms have always been able to sell eggs off of their farm or to small suppliers or small retailers without any hassle from the food police. To be honest with you, what is produced on a small farm and how the animals are cared for, I would trust that over anything that comes out of an industrial combine. If you have never been to one of these egg factories, then you should really go have a look because they are the most disgusting places in the world. I have been in some in England, in Canada, in New Zealand, and they are all exactly the same. They are disgraceful places. If people really understood where the commercial eggs are coming from they wouldn't touch them with a barge pole. In Canada and the food inspection agency, they have done more damage to local farmers, the small farmers, in the last five years then probably in the rest of history. I mean, closing down the meat markets and closing down the egg businesses. They haven't left us much to actually make a living on.

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner and an investigative look into a business operating in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia who has been communicating to area retailers *and* to Deconstructing Dinner that they *have* chickens, when in fact, my visit to the property revealed that there are no chickens at all and there does not appear to have been for quite some time.

Deconstructing Dinner checked in with more than half a dozen of their 18 full time customers, and all of them *were* under the impression that the eggs that they were purchasing were mostly coming from chickens on their farm and from some chickens in the neighbouring Creston Valley.

Deconstructing Dinner also showed our video footage to another farmer in the region who was impacted by that April crack-down on ungraded eggs. This farmer has chosen to remain anonymous but he responds here to the video that demonstrates that there are *no* chickens at Eggs R Uz... he also indicates that he knows of only one farmer in the Creston Valley who sends their eggs to get graded at Eggs R Uz.

Anonymous: What the video showed me was there is something very fishy in Denmark because where I came from eggs come from chickens not boxes. So, it comes right down to it, I would like to say, where are the chickens? I've got chickens myself and to get seventy-five eggs you need at least one hundred chickens. If they're getting that quantity of eggs you would need a very large-sized run of chickens out there. And, I really fail to see any chickens, or sign of live chickens in the video. I know of only one small producer in Creston that actually moves his eggs through that grading station. His production is nowhere, it's not even one seventy-second of their production, so take it from there.

JS: This particular farmer had been selling eggs to a food store in the City of Nelson and is no longer able to.

Anonymous: Oh, we supply local retailer and we had been supplying them for fifteen years and the CFIA came in and through points of recycled egg cartons, no product labels in French, the eggs not being certified and graded. We were told we couldn't move our eggs through the retail outlet. The retail outlet was threatened with a five thousand dollar fine. Hence, for the business, we pulled our product out to take it direct to the consumer now. The people of Nelson, fortunate, are awesome. They rallied to the cause and we deliver direct to a lot of houses where we make sizable drops in different neighbourhoods and those people distribute them to their friends and neighbours around so slowed down yes, but not stopped.

JS: Again, this farmer heard hear has chosen to remain anonymous, and he further reacts to what he saw in the video in light of him having just lost his market following the April CFIA visits to area stores.

Anonymous: Well, it tells me that the local farmers cannot count on the government bureaucracies to be an ally. They are used more often than not as a whipping tool. A big egg company will have a problem, they use the agencies to come chase down the small farmers, and we pay the consequences for the big company's unethical procedures. It fits right in the paradigm that we have seen in the past twenty, thirty years of agriculture: Getting bigger and bigger at the expense of the consumer and the small producer.

JS: Now what about the public, how will a story like this impact the local food image. No doubt coming across practices like this will create some new skepticism as to the validity of the "local" label as its clear there are businesses taking full advantage of the widespread interest in

supporting local food and the premium price being paid to support local farmers. Like many small-scale farmers, Jeremy Lack of Mad Dog Farm is well aware of the challenges that local farmers face when they're up against not only the industrial food system but businesses who are taking unfair advantage of the attractive local market. Through his work with the Kootenay Local Agricultural Society – the organization launched a local label – Kootenay Mountain Grown – a label that certifies that the product is indeed from the local region.

Jeremy Lack: The problem with local as a label, right, which is what drives most of the small retail markets for local agriculture produce. It is moving away from organic, it's more into local now, because there is an assumption that most local farms will grow organically anyways because that is the mean now. The problem with these things is that nobody around who, to back up their claim that it is actually local. You see of the farmers market, people coming in and selling local this, local that and you know damn well that it isn't grown around here. You know damn well that it coming from the Okanagan or its coming from the Lower Mainland. I am a firm believer that local means local. And yet you have all these people both retail and in the farmers markets who market their products as if they are local and by local they mean B.C. possibly. The advantage of local, the local label, is being destroyed for a lot of the small farms around here because all of the stuff is coming in from outside and being marketed as being local and it isn't local. This sort of stuff, going on, where the eggs are coming in from Alberta or from wherever the hell they are coming in from, is just another nail in the coffin of local agriculture. Because when this goes out, I have no doubt that a lot of the people are going to get seriously pissed off about it. And, they are going to become less trusting of the label local and that's why I think with the Kootenay Local Agriculture Society and its Kootenay Mountain Grown Label where you actually have farmers certifying they've inspected the other guys farm and whatever they are selling is actually grown on the farm and it is a local product and it's grown locally. Is going to have to be the way for all because these people are all on the bandwagon for local produce and a lot of them are not.

JS: Jeremy Lack of Mad Dog Farm located just outside of Castlegar, British Columbia.

Our video footage of Eggs r Uz and the absence of chickens on their property did not sit well with Jeremy for obvious reasons, but what appeared to bother him the most, was that an Inspector with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency was recommending to businesses that they can purchase eggs *from* Eggs R Uz.

Heard earlier on the show was a clip from a conversation I had with Bonny Kavaloff of Nature's Den in the City of Rossland. Nature's Den received a visit among a dozen other stores back in April by the CFIA Inspector who acting on a complaint demanded that those stores remove their ungraded farm-fresh eggs from their shelves. I played that clip for Jeremy Lack *after* he viewed our undercover footage of Eggs R Uz.

Jon Steinman

And so at this point do you have any other options as far as accessing eggs?

Bonny Kavaloff

No.

Jon Steinman

No and you've looked into that or?

Bonny Kavaloff

No. I haven't looked into it because he said if we are going to get fined and shut our business down, no. Well actually yes. I'm sorry. The access to eggs is from a place outside of Creston who does have an inspection place.

Jon Steinman

Okay.

Bonny Kavaloff

Yes. That's. Yes.

Jon Steinman

So, that would be the option?

Bonny Kavaloff

Yes and I'm not interested. I'd rather do the local stuff.

Jon Steinman

Yeah and how were you made aware of them?

Bonny Kavaloff

Um, apparently David, that government guy told it about him.

Jon Steinman

Okay.

Bonny Kavaloff

Yeah.

JS: And here's Jeremy Lack, responding to that clip.

Jeremy Lack: I would say I want a police investigation of that chap. Because a) that isn't right, having a government official interfering in the market like that is acting holy wrong. The fact is looking at your video of their facility; I very much doubt whether it would comply with the regulations. So, there must be some ulterior motive behind it.

JS: Jeremy Lack of Mad Dog Farm and he is the Chairman of the Kootenay Local Agricultural Society.

It should be noted that shortly before this story went to air, we did contact the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to alert them to what we've uncovered and they *have* begun to investigate Eggs R Uz. We'll be sure to keep you posted here on the show, on our web site and on our

Facebook page as to how that investigation unfolds. In the meantime, Eggs R Uz's largest customer, The Kootenay Co-op Food Store in Nelson has chosen to take a precautionary measure and remove those eggs pending a CFIA investigation. Here's Cindy King.

Cindy King: At this point we are going to continue with our investigation, with them and with verifiable sources. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency is also conducting an investigation and we will use their results as part of our final decision and as a precautionary measure we are going to be pulling their eggs as of this afternoon, and supplying, we will have a new supply of certifiable organic packaged eggs from the coast.

JS: We should also note that before this story went to air, we did attempt to contact Eggs R Uz to give them an opportunity to respond to all that we've uncovered. When we called, there was no answer, and clearly, our call was being screened, because moments later Heide Stang called back and when she discovered it was Kootenay Co-op Radio calling, she hung up. According to a business in the area, it appears somehow Eggs R Uz did become aware of our investigative report, and has seemingly chosen to not speak with us.

And again, don't forget to check out our web site at deconstructingdinner.ca for more information on today's show. Today's episode is archived under the September 2nd, 2010 broadcast. There you'll also find our short video produced using footage from our visit to Eggs R Uz, and you'll also find a link to our May 6, 2010 broadcast when we examined the April, 2010 crack down on ungraded eggs *and* backyard eggs right here in the City of Nelson.

And placing that May episode alongside today's, it's clear that there is a big question now looming over the West Kootenay region of British Columbia, just where can we all get eggs that *don't* come from a factory farm, that doesn't require us to drive *to* a farm, that doesn't require a farmer to make *multiple* trips to individual houses, and that does not require a farmer to commit to going to a farmers market – which many farmers don't want to do.

For Nelson's Matt Lowe – a familiar voice here on the show – and the co-founder of the Kootenay Grain Community Supported Agriculture project, he was *one* of those people seeking to create an alternative, and that too, is no longer an option.

Matt Lowe: We are raising four chickens at our house. The bylaw officer visited our house and said that we had to get rid of our chickens and at that point we started purchasing our eggs from the Kootenay Co-op again. I just had assumed that they were good healthy eggs, free range eggs, you know similar to ones that we were getting from our own house. Just a short while ago I cracked one of these eggs open and the yolks were totally pale and bland. The flavour of the egg was noticeably bland. It wasn't very good.

JS: You have now seen this video, how does it make you feel about your backyard hens that you used to want to have?

Matt Lowe: It makes me a bit angrier, that you know, we lost our chickens because we had a good, healthy source of food and protein that we were getting from our backyard. The fact that

the eggs we are getting now don't seem to be very healthy at all and they are not very flavorful is something that I think irritates me even more.

JS: Also helping close out our broadcast today, the farmer who we heard from earlier and who chooses to remain anonymous. He hopes that this story will help rally people in the region to create more options for farmers to get their farm-fresh eggs to residents, and he still hopes that the CFIA can help support those efforts. For farmers like him, it's not economically feasible to construct a registered egg grading station, and he's demanding more common sense.

Anonymous: I guess it keeps me jaded when it comes to the government saying we are trying to support small farmers when we have a government agency going around basically shutting down the market to small farms. That's saying one thing and doing another. I can't support that. I hope that the population will see it and raise an uproar. After all these people are supposed to be working for us and as civil servants it would be nice if they were serving, that would be fifty percent of their job, if they're civil than that's the other fifty percent. It would be really nice if they used a little bit of common sense when it comes to small farmers. If I have a hundred chickens, I cannot afford to setup a separate room in my house with two different coolers, totally self-contained, buy cartons, it just isn't viable.

(A montage of sound bites from people interviewed this episode.)

JS: And that was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman, I thank my technical assistant John Ryan, the theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson area resident Adham Shaikh, this radio show is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations around the country and relies on the financial support from you, the listener. Support for the program can be made through our web site at deconstructingdinner.ca or by dialing 250 352 9600.