

What is really meant by egg quality?

Nowadays we hear more and more about quality and, in particular, egg quality so in this short article we will consider just what is really meant by these phrases.

In essence there are no hard and fast rules about egg quality because it is subjective and, as such, is very much in the minds of the consumers. Thus, as the opinions of consumers are somewhat volatile, our definition of quality can not be a rigid one.

For example, it is only in the last few years that the whole issue of GMOs has risen its head and this has been accompanied by some consumers expanding their definition of quality to include 'eggs from birds that have only received GMO free feeds'.

Qualities are as they are perceived by the consumers. As all consumers do not have the same views, in many situations we are going to go with the majority view. However, this does mean that, on occasions, a minority viewpoint will create a niche market for a particular type of egg or type of production system.

In this context we must be very wary of market research because when the respondents know the viewpoint of the researcher a significant number of them will give the answer that they think the researcher wants to hear rather than a truthful one.

If we look at many market research results it would appear that issues like bird welfare, cages, debeaking, organic production, antibiotics and the like dominate consumer thinking. This is not the case and not so long ago a major independent survey in the UK confirmed that for three quarters of consumers the most

important factor when buying eggs was price!

So, if we look at egg quality logically we need to go through the human senses. The first sense is sight. Our definition of quality will include visual attributes of the egg such as shell colour, yolk colour, albumen viscosity, shell defects, visible dirt on the shell and meat or blood spots. Our next sense is smell and this sense can only be used once the egg has been broken open or cooked.

Basically a good quality egg in this context is one with no abnormal smell or odour associated with it.

Taste is a very important sense because it is central to why the egg was purchased – it was purchased to be eaten and when the consumer eats an egg he wants it to be an enjoyable experience.

This being the case, an egg should taste like an egg should and should not have any abnormal taste or taint. A good example of an abnormal taint is the fishy taint associated with feeding hens too much (or a poor quality) fish meal.

Another sense is touch. A good egg will have a strong shell that will have a smooth feel to it. Thus, a weak shell or a shell that feels dry and/or rough will be regarded as a poor egg and such eggs are frequently encountered in flocks that have experienced a viral challenge such as infectious bronchitis or Newcastle disease.

Another way of looking at quality is from the viewpoint that quality is impaired or lost if there is something present in the egg that should not be. One aspect of this – the presence of meat or blood spots – has already been alluded to. Very occasionally a worm can be

found in an egg and this is the result of a worm 'taking a wrong turn' and finding itself in the oviduct rather than the intestine! Anything that finds itself in the oviduct during egg formation will be incorporated into the egg and it is this fact that is used in some societies to incorporate a surprise present, such as an engagement ring, into an egg.

Chemicals should not be found in a normal egg and so chemicals such as pesticides, heavy metals and antibiotic residues should not be present and if present will impair the egg's quality.

The third way of looking at quality is somewhat esoteric and this is the superimposing of beliefs on to egg quality. A good example of this is the whole issue of free range eggs.

Many consumers believe free range eggs to be of a superior quality. Are they or are they only perceived to be such? In this context other attributes that some consumers perceive as being synonymous with quality include barn, antibiotic free, welfare friendly, 'green' and omega 3 eggs. Depending on the viewpoint you believe in they may be a valid argument that says that omega 3 eggs can be beneficial to human health.

Thus, we could well say that there is not much point trying to define what egg quality is until you have defined who your customer is because you can not be all things to all consumers. Finally, remember consumers can be fickle and whatever they tell you, to some 80% of consumers the issue above all others is price and, in this context, it is worth remembering that unless you are selling eggs at the farm gate your customer is not the consumer! ■