

What comes first: the free-range chicken or the free-range egg

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Many shoppers buy free-range eggs because they think the eggs are superior, rather than out of explicit concern for the hens' welfare, according to our [new research](#).



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We asked 75 people in focus groups and shopping mall interviews about what food choices they make and why. When we asked shoppers what they look for in terms of products that promote animal welfare, the most common answers involved free-range or cage-free eggs.

We then asked people why they chose these products. A strong theme emerged: many shoppers preferred these types of eggs because they viewed them as higher quality, having better taste and colour, more nutritious, and safer than eggs produced using other methods such as barn systems.

Our participants attributed these features to the idea that free-range (and cage-free) egg production was “more natural”, and in particular that hens had access to a “natural diet”. This type of diet in turn led to what they described as more nutritious and safer products.

Regardless of whether these claims are true or not, our survey results are consistent with [other research](#) suggesting that food labelled with humane production methods prompts people to imbue it with certain characteristics, such as better taste and higher nutritional value.

Responsible shopping

To put it in philosophical terms, ethical consumption is about considering “moral others” when we make purchases. In other words, ethical shopping involves thinking about what is best for our communities, the environment and non-human animals.

In contrast, when we act solely as consumers we tend to focus on our own needs and preferences, or those of our family and others close to us. Increasingly we are being encouraged to consider moral others when we buy food, and free-range eggs and meat are key examples of this trend.

Of course, our participants may well care about the welfare of chickens (and other animals). But, when justifying their choices, our research showed ideas of better welfare and better product quality are strongly linked, and often it is the latter that seals the deal.

Our research also implies that consumers think about animal welfare in much broader terms than suggested by the so-called “[five freedoms](#)” used by scientists to define animal welfare.

Our other important finding was that people who bought free-range eggs did not tend to make meat purchases based on similar welfare claims. One reason given was that free-range eggs are seen as relatively affordable, whereas free-range meat was viewed as too expensive.

Note, however, that [some researchers argue](#) that many free-range eggs available in Australia (particularly the cheaper ones) don’t necessarily resolve concerns about animal welfare and health or other ethical issues, as they are produced using large-scale production and distribution systems.

We also found that participants considered the labelling on eggs to be much clearer than on other types of food products that incorporate welfare claims, despite ongoing debates in Australia about [labelling standards](#), including what should count as “free range”.

Several people in our study also indicated that they kept their own hens, or sourced eggs from people who did, to ensure that they were eating only “free-range” products.

Overall, our research highlights the complexities of ethical consumption and the trade-offs that people make between a range of factors, including taste and price. This suggests that common assumptions about why people buy free-range eggs may be too simplistic.

A shared understanding of what “good” farm animal welfare means and why it matters is an essential starting point for a much broader conversation. We need to debate how we can sustainably and humanely produce affordable, safe and nutritious food.

Consumer demand alone doesn’t tell us [how people define “good food”](#) or “good eggs”.

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