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WHAT IS FOOD QUALITY?

by
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Presents the various aspects of food quality from the consumers' viewpoint.

What is food quality? It's a nice tidy little question with as many answers as there are people to give them. To come up with a workable answer, I searched through the files, discussed the question of quality with some consumers and I even gave the subject some thought. And I found an answer in the form of a question. What is food quality? Quality of what, and according to whom?

Definitions of quality include the precise: "The distinctive trait, characteristic, capacity or virtue of a product that sets it apart from all others." "Quality", according to the 1970 Yearbook of Agriculture, "is the measure or expression of goodness." When I asked one homemaker what quality meant to her she said, "Ask my neighbor she really knows quality food." A definition of quality I picked up while attending an industry meeting is "Quality is what you think the competition thinks the standard is." Put still another way quality turns out to be the standard the consumer will accept.

There is little need to emphasize the point that family and institutional food buyers have a somewhat different set of quality standards from that of other buyers within the food production and distribution system.

Concerns of people involved in food production, processing and distribution include selection and use of plants and animals which will produce characteristics of performance excellence related to harvesting, shipping, processing, and shelf life. Characteristics of performance excellence do, of course, include factors of food safety and nutritive value. I say "of course there is concern for food safety and nutritive value" although, there seems to be considerable difficulty proving concern for either when confronted by consumer advocates.

Food buyers are concerned about some of these same characteristics of excellence. They express them differently. Lacking the objective measuring devices of other segments of the production, processing and distribution system, consumers rely on judgments of color, feel texture, odor, sound and the written word. When the opportunity presents itself, the food buyer may also take advantage of the judgment of taste.

We have been told, at times in rather strident tones, that consumers' chief concerns relate to food safety and nutritive value:

- That consumers fear nutritive value is lost in processing and no attempt is made to restore it.
- That nutrients and other food ingredients are added to foods far beyond safe limits.
- That pesticide, herbicide, and recently, that some hormone residues are present in the food supply.

I did a count of questions that come into our Public Service Department and discovered that of 500 questions over the past 10 months, 400 of them were directly concerned with food. Presumably, these 400 questions should give some clues to what concerns consumers. Bear in mind, please, this Public Service Department is located at the University of California, Berkeley, where all sorts of craziness, food craziness included, is reputed to have its roots.

A little more than half the questions asked, 56%, were direct requests for how-to-do-it. "How can I pickle olives?" was the question asked most often.

Other questions included: "What can I do with a tree full of lemons?" "Can I freeze coconut?" "Could you send me a recipe for baking a whole salmon?"

About 33% of the questions were directly concerned with nutrition: "Where can I get a list of the nutritive value of different foods?" "Are vitamins in pills the same as vitamins in food?" "What cheeses are low in fat?" "How many calories in Ricotta cheese and in cottage cheese?"

About 5% of the questions concerned food safety: "My grandmother dies recently and left a large number of cans of home canned pickles, fruits and vegetables. . . are they safe to eat?" "Are juniper berries safe to eat?" "How can you tell if tuna is contaminated with botulism?" "My freezer was off for two days. . .can I refreeze the vegetables and pork chops?"

About 3% of the questions concerned meat grades and labeling: "Is a meat market allowed to package round steak cut in small pieces, label it 'stroganoff beef' and sell it for a higher price than the piece of round steak in one piece?" "What is the best grade of beef?" "How much fat is in regular ground beef in the supermarket?"

It was difficult to classify 3% of the questions: "What is a kiwi?" "Where can I buy eels?" and "Are guinea pigs edible?"

I'm still not sure about the guinea pig question. Was it a problem of safety? Nutrition? Preparation? Maybe the quinea pig had become a storage problem.

Food buyers have specific performance expectations for food: they expect meat to be tender when cooked; they expect salad greens to be crisp; they expect the packaged flour mix to turn out a product that is acceptable to the family or clientele; they expect canned peaches to live up to the descriptive label; they expect frozen dinners to satisfy the appetite.

Food buyers put a high priority on eye appeal of fresh foods in the market. Well colored fruits and vegetables, uniform sizes and products that are free of any kind of damage will get a good rating from most food buyers. Yet they know intuitively or by whatever sixth sense food buyers use, that color isn't <u>the</u> reliable guide to quality. If you don't believe it you have never watched food buyers perform their food buying chores.

Because color and uniform size get considerable emphasis from other segments of the marketing system, consumers perhaps give these two factors a little too much emphasis but that is the way it is. Exterior color often has little to do with what's inside and uniform sizes do not indicate how good or bad a food is. But what other factors can the food buyer judge?

At the meat counter, the food buyer relies on the reputation of the food store or on grades, or brand names as guides to quality. When you dig into food shoppers' judgments of meat quality factors, you get a mixed bag and they may or may not match government and industry's judgment.

We are all familiar with the studies done of consumer preferences for beef, in which the preference turns out to result from the halo effect of the word "Choice," rather than any accurate judgment of quality on the part of the food shopper.

Palatability, the way food tastes, ranks high on the family and institutional food buyer's list of quality standards. Yet, this is one quality factor the buyer can rarely judge until after the sales transaction. Indeed, there are maturity standards for practically everything that grows--livestock, poultry, cereal, fruits and vegetables. The standards relate, or are supposed to, to palatability. And there are palatability standards for processed foods. But the standards lose something in the translation. Immature fruits and vegetables still appear in the market; overmature peas, beans and corn are still processed; the word "seasoning" on the package labels of processed foods (expecially mixtures) translates "too much salt".

So what is quality? Quality of food includes all those characteristics of excellence that make it acceptable to the food buyer. The fact that food quality turns out to be the standard consumers will accept doesn't have to be a bad thing. The majority of consumers find acceptable product quality in the market. They must, estimates vary, but it appears that shoppers in food markets make choices at the rate of about 4 per second. Shoppers do take sanitation and safety of food pretty much for granted.

Another measure of how well quality standards meet consumers' expectations is that it has taken 20 years to get a real consumer movement under way. And we aren't hearing the majority of consumers, we hear the crusaders, those who will save us in spite of ourselves. What they advocate is good. But the results of the crusade were obvious a long time ago. And the decisions that have brought nutrition labeling, ingredient labeling and price per measure should have been made without the high pressure and invective that finally precipitated them. And if you think all this additional information is the end to making better food shoppers--you are wrong. We may be better educated, more sophisticated and have access to a better commodity system.

It will be well worthwhile, starting now, to listen more closely to the real consumers. Hear them when they say they want fresh strawberries that taste like fresh strawberries, fresh tomatoes that taste like fresh tomatoes, and ripe peaches, plums and melons.

If you insist that little can be done in guaranteeing good flavor characteristics of fresh foods my only reaction is why not?

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