

FREE-RANGE vs BATTERY

Read the following on free-range versus battery egg production.

What should come first, the chicken or the egg? Supporters of free range egg production say the chicken. Central to the free range debate is the welfare of the hens.

Supporters of battery production opt for the egg. It is cheaper and more efficient to produce eggs by the battery (or caged) method, and this should be a producer's priority, they claim.

What is battery farming? Battery hens are kept in artificially lighted sheds in wire cages with slightly sloped floors so that the eggs will roll into trays. There are usually three or four hens to a cage and they are debeaked to prevent them hurting one another.

The definition of free range hens varies but generally the term is used to define hens which aren't caged. Some argue that hens aren't truly free range unless there are only 10 to an acre; others consider 300 hens to an acre still to be free range.

If you buy an egg marked free range you can probably expect that the hen that laid it has been able to roam free throughout the day, has had access to weatherproof shelter and has not been subject to artificial lighting.

The hens should not have been debeaked and, unlike battery hens, should not routinely have been given artificial yolk colouring or antibiotics.

So which should you buy? There is little difference nutritionally and as our tests show, egg quality is not dependent on the type of farming involved. Free range eggs were among the best—and worst—of those we bought.

Free range eggs won't necessarily be free from chemicals either. Organochlorines were detected in free range and battery eggs and one free range sample had unacceptably high levels.

All things being equal, the free range debate comes down to how much you care about the hens used for egg production.

According to a spokesperson for the NSW Egg Corporation, battery production is cheaper and so far, 'consumers have been keen to vote with their chequebooks'.

But you may be able to locate free range eggs being sold more cheaply than their marketing authority counterpart.

If you can't and you're committed to animal welfare, then even paying more, they're worth the money. If you're not, compare the prices and quality of free range eggs with the ones you usually buy.

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1. What is free range?
2. What are battery cages?
3. What arguments support each method of keeping laying birds?

You might like to research this topic a little further and set up a class debate on the issue.

