

Eggs lose weight on supermarket shelves

ITHACA, NY — Americans are so used to shopping for eggs by size that they pay scant attention to the weight of the eggs. Most shoppers, in fact, couldn't care less about it.

But, it matters to egg inspectors who periodically check eggs in food stores to make sure those eggs weigh as indicated on the carton. Farmers in violation of the law governing the egg weight face a stiff penalty.

Eggs come in several sizes with different weights. Jumbo eggs, for example, must weigh 30 ounces a dozen; extra large 27 ounces; large 24 ounces; medium 21 ounces; and small 18 ounces. Eggs weighing less than 18 ounces a dozen are lumped into the so-called peewee category.

The question is, do eggs sold in the supermarket weigh as shown on the carton?

"Not always," says Robert C. Baker, a poultry scientist in the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University. "A rash of violations has been reported over the years in New York State and in other parts of the country."

Are farmers cheating the shopper?

The Cornell scientist doesn't think so. Farmers claim they abide by the law to the letter, making sure their eggs are at the legal weight before leaving the farm.

Meanwhile, egg inspectors representing state and federal governments sometimes think otherwise, because they occasionally discover eggs sold in the supermarket that don't weigh as much as they should.

Prompted by this snaggy issue, Cornell's Baker decided to settle the argument through an impartial scientific investigation. He wanted to find out who was right, the farmer or the inspector.

The study, in an "eggshell," went this way. A bunch of eggs from one strain of Single Comb

White Leghorn, one of the most productive breeds known, was separated into three popular sizes - namely, extra large, large, and medium. Half of the eggs were stored in a supermarket-type refrigerator, with the temperature set at 55°F. The other half were kept at room temperature (70°F).

In order not to overlook anything, Baker tested eggs produced during three different periods of production: fourth, eighth, and 12th month.

All eggs undergoing the test were weighed every day for 21 days—long enough for eggs to travel from the farm to the consumer's dinner table through the supermarket.

The result? The Cornell scientist found that those eggs, indeed, lost weight

somewhere along the way. It turned out that the average weight loss in all refrigerated eggs was 1.2 grams per egg, or 14.4 grams per dozen; that translates into about half-an-ounce loss in weight per dozen.

Eggs stored at room temperature lost even more weight, averaging 2.7 grams. That's more than twice the weight loss of those eggs kept in the refrigerator.

In addition, eggs produced during the fourth month of production lost weight least, whereas those from the 12th month of production lost most.

"The larger the egg, the greater the weight loss," reports Baker, a

professor and chairman of Cornell's Department of Poultry and Avian Sciences.

Why do eggs lose so much weight?

"That's simple. They lose weight through evaporation," explains Baker.

So Baker's verdict is that neither the farmer nor the egg inspector is at fault. But, law is law, hence the situation facing both the farmer and the inspector is ticklish, Baker acknowledges.

"One solution, I think," says Baker, "is that the farmer should pack eggs that weigh a bit more than legally required, taking into consideration that the eggs will lose some weight before shoppers buy them in the supermarket."

The Cornell scientist hopes that his findings help settle this longstanding issue because the real culprit is the egg, not the farmer.

Ultimately, the winner will be the consumer.

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