

They've got egg on their faces

In January the media reported, with enthusiasm, where Spain's most pampered laying hens (apparently) live [\[1\]](#). The descriptions, in these reports, of the lives of the hens are laughable. They include comments that would seem sarcastic, were it not for the fact that they are made with a mixture of ignorance and frivolity, which is no less serious. The hens in the farm in question, located in El Barraco (Ávila), live in [battery cages](#), and together they produce about 90,000 eggs every day. We are told these 40,000 laying hens listen to music, such as opera or Kenny G, which induces them to produce tirelessly. After fifteen months of laying eggs almost on a daily basis they are exhausted and, without ever having seen sunlight, they are sent to the slaughterhouse and turned into bouillon cubes, since they are not fit for the meat market. A happy ending for the pampered hens of golden eggs.

European regulations have established that the breeding of caged hens –which doesn't measure up to any minimum standard of animal welfare– will be banned in 2012, and in its place other breeding methods will be introduced that are more respectful of the birds' nature [\[2\]](#), in terms of space, food, the ability to move, to scratch the ground, peck on grass, roost on a stick to sleep, bathe in dust...; all of which have been recognised as innate behavioural needs for hens. As a useful historic reference, it is worth knowing that in Ancient Roman times hens were regarded as “non-domestic animals”, as they lacked *animus revertendi*, i.e. the habit to return to the yard, which is, still today, the way our Civil Code goes about distinguishing domestic animals from wild ones [\[3\]](#).

Hens bred in battery cages –even if these have been “enriched” with more space, sticks and nests–, have altered fertility cycles so that they fatten and produce eggs like vending machines. The breeders that, like those in the report mentioned in the beginning, have chosen to adapt the cages for their hens, have done so making use of an alternative option provided in the norm, because the strict recommendation of the European Council was to completely and irrevocably phase out the breeding of laying hens in battery cages by 1 January 2012. Incidentally, the hens arrive at the farm already with their beaks clipped, a cruel mutilation that, so they assure us (and this is reflected in EU and Spanish legislation [\[5\]](#)), is necessary to prevent the hens from pecking and hurting each other –in other words, cannibalism–, in the limited space in which they are permanently confined [\[6\]](#).

The regulations currently in force [\[7\]](#) require that the eggs that are sold for human consumption have a series of digits printed on the shell, and, optionally, also the expiration date [\[8\]](#). This numbering convention starts with a digit that refers to the breeding method. It is very important to take notice of this digit because it reflects the quality of life the hens have enjoyed and, consequently, the quality of the egg. In other words, it provides an indication of the amount of suffering there has been in the production of the eggs:

- a “3” corresponds to eggs laid by caged hens;
- a “2” is for the eggs of hens bred on the floor in large enclosures without access to an open air area;
- a “1” identifies free-range hens that live in the open and can peck the ground;
- a “0” is reserved for organic eggs.

It is worthwhile to look at the sort of eggs offered in the supermarket. Most consumers –and most shopkeepers!– are unaware of the meaning of the numbers I have just presented. Even when there have been consumer information campaigns regarding this number code, not many supermarkets sell free-range or organic eggs yet. Last year in the UK, a country significantly more sensitive toward animals than

Spain, there was a strong consumer protest against the selling of eggs from battery-caged hens. An association was then created, the [British Hen Welfare Trust](#), to promote responsible consumption, to improve the lives of laying hens and to provide support for the British poultry industry to produce free-range eggs.

We don't know or we don't want to know. Truth be told, the law (and I've only offered a sample of the abundant regulations in existence) seems to wish to prevent the suffering of laying hens, but it allows alternative systems that disguise that suffering with opera arias, or with sticks and fake nests, while they continue to crowd the hens in cages. If not the eggs, golden are the profits. But they've got egg on their faces.

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[1] External links: [El Norte de Castilla](#), [El Correo](#), [La Voz Digital](#), [Avila Digital](#).

[2] Directive 1999/74/CE, [Download](#), incorporated into Spanish legislation by Royal Decree 3/2002 of 11 January, which establishes the minimum standards of protection of laying hens. [Download](#).

[3] Cc. Art. 465, Tit. on possession.

[4] Paragraphs 8 and 10 of the preamble of Directive 1999/74/C [Download](#).

[5] Directive 1999/74/CE, Annex, requirement 8, [Download](#), the text prohibits all mutilations, but adds: "In order to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism, however, the Member States may authorise beak trimming provided it is carried out by qualified staff on chickens that are less than 10 days old and intended for laying." The same norm is replicated in Royal Decree 3/2002 of 11 January, Annex 1, requirement 8, [Download](#). The authorization to mutilate the beaks of chickens that are less than 10 days old is nonsensical because the suffering is just as intense.

[6] Annexes II,1 and III,1,a, of Royal Decree 3/2002 of 11 January, is sufficiently illustrative, since it confines laying hens to an area of 550 square cm. in ill-equipped cages, and 600 square cm. for laying hens in enriched cages. [Download](#)

[7] Royal Decree 372/2003 of 28 March, art. 5. [Download](#).

[8] Royal Decree 226/2008 of 15 February, on the marketing of eggs, art 5, 2, b "Facultative labelling" [Download](#).