



Information Sheet 2 – Consumer Perception of Rabbit Meat Production

CONSUMER ATTITUDES TO FARM ANIMAL WELFARE

Consumers are increasingly concerned about how their food is produced and the welfare of the animals involved. Studies across the EU, North America, Latin America, Asia and Australia indicate that animal welfare concerns have become more important to consumers over the past two decades¹. According to the latest Eurobarometer on Animal Welfare, the vast majority (91%) of EU citizens believe it is important to protect the welfare of farmed animals, eight in ten (84%) believe the welfare of farmed animals should be better protected than it is now, and six in ten (60%) are willing to pay more for products from animal welfare-friendly production systems². Additionally, 89% of EU citizens surveyed believe that it is important that farm animals are not kept in individual cages². In 2018, the European Citizens Initiative, End the Cage Ageⁱ, received over 1.4 million signatures calling for legislative proposals to prohibit the use of cages in farming. Two thirds (66%) of British consumers consider animal welfare standards in their dietary choices³. A large majority (86%) of American consumers report purchasing at least one product with a welfare-related label in the past 12 months⁴ and more than half (57%) say they would be likely to choose a restaurant because it serves welfare-certified animal products⁵.

CONSUMER ATTITUDES TO RABBIT WELFARE AND PRODUCTION SYSTEMS

Decreasing trends in rabbit meat consumption globally and scientific studies from the US, Hungary, and Romania reveal that many consumers avoid rabbit meat and have never eaten it or have eaten it only rarely⁶⁻⁸. Rejection of rabbit meat is associated with a perception of rabbits principally as companion animals^{6,9,10}. A majority (57%) of consumers in the US consider rabbits to be pets rather than livestock and 37% are opposed to eating them⁶. US consumers ranked rabbits fourth (out of 16 animal species/products) in levels of opposition to consumption, after cats, dogs and horses⁶. In Hungary, more than one third (35.9%) of consumers who reject rabbit meat listed regret (feeling sorry about killing the animal) as their main concern regarding eating rabbit meat⁷.

Production and consumption of rabbit meat in Europe is declining¹⁰⁻¹², partly attributable to rising criticism of welfare conditions¹², and rabbit meat is seen as expensive and more difficult to prepare which is less attractive to consumers, particularly younger consumers, that often prefer simple quick-to-cook options¹³. Declining consumption of rabbit meat is particularly evident among younger consumers, even in countries with a tradition of rabbit meat consumption, such as Spain⁹. Surveys of attitudes to animal welfare across eight European countries (Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, UK) found that consumers in Italy and Spain expressed the highest levels of concern for the welfare of rabbits reared for meat (mean Likert score >6.5 on a scale from 0 = not concerned at all to 10 = totally concerned)¹⁴, likely reflecting the higher levels of production and consumption of rabbit meat in Spain and Italy.

Avoiding animal suffering was one of the top three most important factors (from nine options, Likert score 7.46 on a scale from 1-10) for Italian consumers when purchasing rabbit meat, and was considered more important than environmental impact, organic production, local production, source, brand, and price¹⁵. Responsible use of antibiotics was considered the most important factor (Likert

ⁱ <https://www.endthecageage.eu/en/>

score 8.09)¹⁵. Seven in ten (71.5%) Italian rabbit meat consumers state that they look for information on how the animal was raised on the label¹⁵.

Two thirds (64.6%) of Italian consumers consider the use of cages in rabbit breeding to be incompatible with animal welfare¹⁵. Half (50.4%) stated that they would definitely buy meat at a slightly higher price if conditions protecting animal welfare were guaranteed on farms, and a further 46.5% stated that they would buy it, depending on the price¹⁵.

The housing system was the second most important factor (4.23 on a scale 1-5) for Hungarian consumers when purchasing rabbit meat, after feeding method (4.48)⁷. These factors were considered more important than origin or genotype. Hungarian consumers were willing to pay 16.8% extra for meat from rabbits fed with hay in addition to pellets (over pellets only), and 15.6% extra for meat from rabbits reared on deep litter⁷.

A survey of consumer attitudes to rabbit meat consumption across eight countries (Brazil, China, France, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Spain) found that production conditions and slaughtering method were important factors affecting purchasing decisions¹⁶. Housing was considered very important (overall mean 3.92 on a scale from 1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important), particularly in Poland (4.36), Italy (4.27), Hungary (4.01), Mexico (4.00), and Brazil (3.96) (Figure 1)¹⁶. Housing was the second most important factor in Italy (4.27) and China (3.56). Slaughtering method (overall mean 3.72) was considered particularly important in Brazil (4.40) and Mexico (4.22), being the most important factor in both of these countries¹⁶. Origin was the most important factor in France (4.65), Italy (4.50) and Hungary (4.45), while feeding was the most important factor in Poland (4.47) and Spain (3.80) (Figure 1).

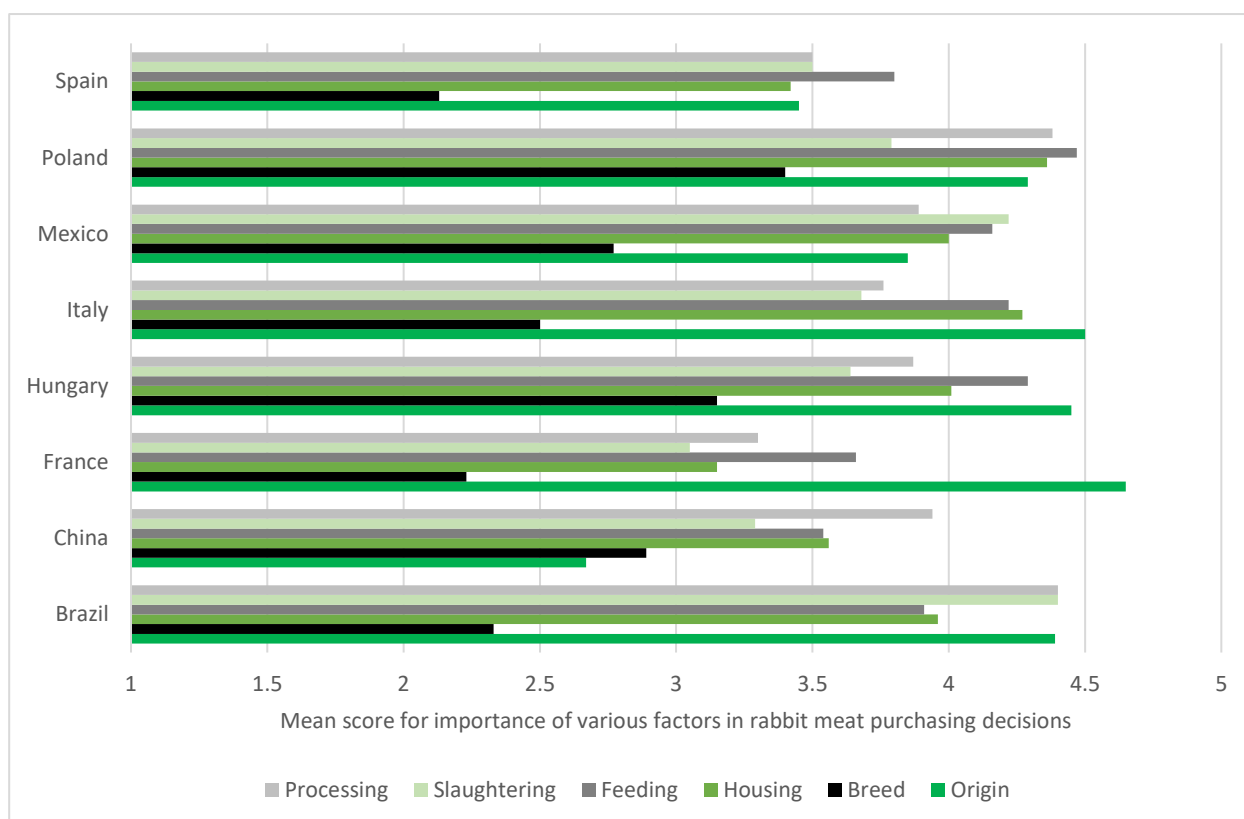


Figure 1. Importance of various factors in rabbit meat purchasing decisions in eight countries, on a scale from 1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important. Source: Szendro et al. (2020)¹⁶.

Key findings on consumer attitudes to the welfare of rabbits reared for meat in selected countries.

	<p>Italian consumers are concerned about the welfare of rabbits reared for meat¹⁴. Housing was the second most important factor (after origin) in rabbit meat purchasing decisions for consumers in Italy (mean score 4.27 on a scale from 1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important)¹⁶. Two thirds (64.6%) of Italian consumers surveyed consider the use of cages in rabbit breeding to be incompatible with animal welfare¹⁵. Half (50.4%) stated that they would definitely buy meat at a slightly higher price if conditions protecting animal welfare were guaranteed on farms, and a further 46.5% stated that they would buy it, depending on the price¹⁵.</p>
	<p>In France, although 80% of the people surveyed claimed to eat rabbit meat, 40% say they have reduced or stopped their consumption¹³. While French consumers consider origin to be the most important factor when purchasing rabbit meat, housing is also considered important^{13,16}. 42% of French consumers are concerned about the level of antibiotic usage in the industry¹³.</p>
	<p>No scientific literature on public perception of rabbit farming in the UK was identified. The rabbit farming industry in the UK is small, and they are more often seen as pets.</p>
	<p>Out of eight countries surveyed, the highest score for the importance of housing in rabbit meat purchasing decisions was given by consumers in Poland (mean score 4.36 on a scale from 1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important)¹⁶.</p>
	<p>Spanish consumers are concerned about the welfare of rabbits reared for meat¹⁴. While slaughtering method was the second most important factor (after feeding) in rabbit meat purchasing decisions, housing was also considered important for consumers in Spain¹⁶.</p>
	<p>Housing was the second most important factor (after level of processing) in rabbit meat purchasing decisions for consumers in China (mean score 3.56 on a scale from 1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important)¹⁶.</p>
	<p>A majority (57%) of Americans consider rabbits to be pets rather than livestock and 37% are opposed to eating them⁶.</p>
	<p>In Mexico, organic production was the most important attribute of rabbit meat for which consumers were willing to pay a price premium¹⁷. More than half (53%) of Mexican consumers were willing to pay more for organic rabbit meat and the mean price increase they would accept was 15%¹⁷.</p>

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