

Should food standards be left to the market in post-Brexit Britain?

If so, to choose quality food, people would need to spend substantial time and cognitive effort on each purchase decision, write Cesar Revoredo-Giha and Montserrat Costa-Font



Food policy discussions surrounding post-Brexit Britain have moved to some extent from whether we shall be able to get enough food, which is not really a major problem since we are only a nation of about 68 million inhabitants, to one whether food will satisfy the high production standards offered in the UK.

Food quantity and quality cannot be taken separately. The discussion must therefore highlight that the country gets food imports of the quantity and the quality needed. However, while quantity is a tangible dimension, food quality is not. It comprises safety, ethical, functional, nutritional, and sensory attributes that are far from trivial (EU, 2020). In this note, we discuss consumers' capacity to discern high-quality food and what may prevent them from doing so. Can consumers identify high-quality food? Should food quality be left as a market choice?

UK consumers are concerned about food standards

A study by the consumer watchdog Which? (Kellet, 2020), in the context of Brexit and the Agricultural Bill vote, disclosed that 94% of UK consumers say it is important that existing standards are maintained, and around 77% say they would be uncomfortable eating chlorinated chicken, while 81% say they would be uncomfortable eating beef and consuming milk where cows had been given growth hormones to increase production.

Similarly, a survey commissioned by Food Standards Scotland found that 71% of Scottish households would be very concerned if products like genetically modified foods and chlorinated chicken were sold in Scotland (FSS, 2020).

Recently Balcombe et al., 2020 document that no matter what trade deals are concluded by the UK government in the future, UK consumers display a strong preference to have no hormone implants in beef; no ractopamine in pig feed; no chlorine-washed chicken; and no atrazine pesticide used in corn

production. That is, consumers do care about food quality standards a great deal, and clear and transparent food labelling should remove uncertainty with respect to purchase decisions.

The above evidence is not surprising. Given the exposure of chlorinated chicken in the media (e.g., [BBC, 2020](#); [Thompson, 2020 a](#) and [b](#)) it would have been strange to find a substantial number of consumers responding the opposite, i.e., that they do not care about food standards or they are very keen to purchase the infamous chickens.

Three facts of consumer quality choices

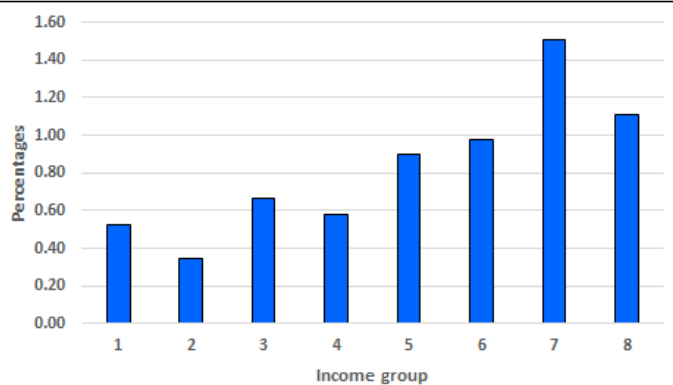
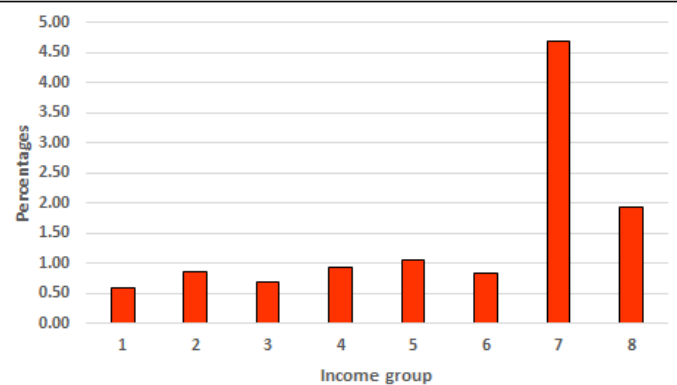
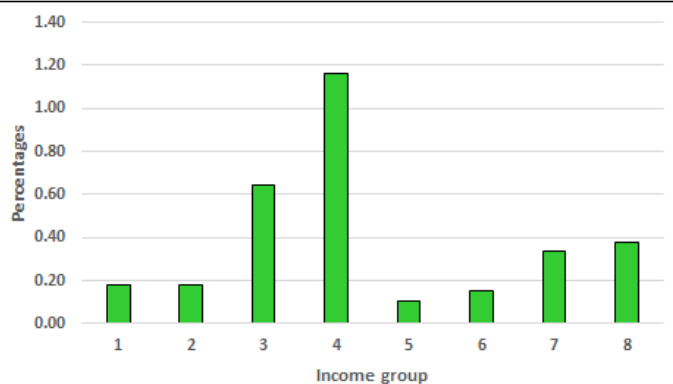
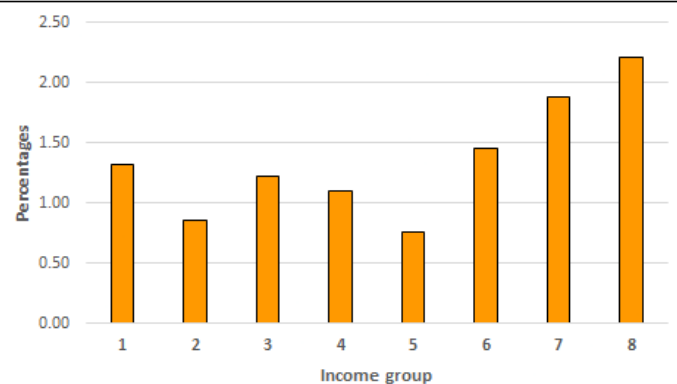
If consumers have so clear preferences about food standards, then it would not be a problem to allow any food quality to be imported, as consumers would basically apply their sovereignty and reveal their free choices (i.e., not buying it) and retailers necessarily would stop importing the rejected product. However, there are at least three unintended consequences of a free choice scenario on the capacity to discern high-quality food: one is their preferences, second is how they make their food decisions, and the third is the information that they are provided.

Consumers face limitations in making food quality judgements

As regards consumers' preferences, against the backdrop that "consumers nowadays demand high quality food" or "there is an increase in consumers' interest about food quality, where their food comes from, and its ingredients", evidence suggests that consumers are segmented between those that are more interested in lower prices (under the assumption that the food supply is safe) and others more interested in particular attributes (e.g., satisfying animal welfare, being environmentally sustainable, consuming healthier amounts of fat, salt or sugar).

This can be easily appreciated in Figure 1, which presents the percentage of organic purchases in total meat purchases by income group. Despite consumers' interest in environmental issues, as shown by the recent Citizens Assembly report ([UK Parliament, 2020](#)), the organic market in the UK remains quite modest. Nevertheless, the Figure highlights that higher income groups (7 and 8 in the Figure) are not always necessarily the keenest to buy organic meat as shown in the case of pork.

Figure 1. Share of organic purchases by income group and meat, UK (2019)

Beef**Lamb****Pork****Poultry**

Source: Own elaboration based on Kantar Worldpanel data.

Note:

1 - £0 - £9,999 per year

3 - £20,000 - £29,999 per year

5 - £40,000 - £49,999 per year

7 - £60,000 - £69,999 per year

2 - £10,000 - £19,999 per year

4 - £30,000 - £39,999 per year

6 - £50,000 - £59,999 per year

8 - £70,000 per year

Consumers do not always invest cognitive effort in their food choices

Research has shown (e.g., [Wansink and Sobel, 2007](#)) that in the area of food choices alone, consumers are estimated to make over 200 choice decisions per day. [Chandon and Wansink \(2012\)](#) find that given the number of decisions it is unlikely that individuals allocate substantial cognitive effort and time to each decision and those decisions regarding small budget items like food or consumer packaged goods would seem more likely to be relegated to some form of habitual choice behaviour. Hence, *choices are not always likely to reflect food quality judgements*.

The information provided to consumers

In the examples presented above—chlorinated chickens, beef from animals grown with hormones—information is clearly provided to consumers with the product. So what information is currently mandatory when selling food and drink products in the UK? The [UK food labelling regulation](#) states that the following information must appear in the label:

- The name of the food
- The lot number and 'best before' or 'use by' date (or instructions on where to find it)
- Any necessary warnings (GM ingredients, irradiated products, packaged in a protective atmosphere, alcohol content above 1.2%)
- Net quantity information
- A list of ingredients (if more than 1)
- The name and address of the UK business responsible for the information on the food or, if the business is not established in the UK, the name and address of the importer.

- The country of origin (for beef, veal, lamb, mutton, pork, goat, poultry, fish and shellfish, honey, olive oil, wine, fruit and vegetables imported from outside the EU).
- Any special storage instructions for use or cooking

There are also rules for **labelling organic products** that currently follow the EU legislation, but that might change after the transition period.

In addition, there is more information provided by private certification schemes. An example, in the context of meats, is **RSPCA**, which provides a label certifying to consumers that the product complies with particular production practices. In many cases it is not clear what is behind a label by just seeing the label (i.e., without further research). **RSPCA**, for instance, covers every aspect of the animals' lives, including feed and water, the environment they live in, how they are managed, health care, transport and humane slaughter.

Recently, M&S announced that from October 2020 they would eliminate soya from the production of its RSPCA-assured milk (44 British farmers) as part of its commitment to end deforestation in its supply chain (**The Guardian, 2020**). Looking at the RSPCA label, a normal consumer (i.e., one that does not bother to check on the internet how the product she buys has been produced) would not have the possibility to know that M&S has taken such an important environmental step. Only those following the news closely or very keen on the topic would be able to remember the fact. Moreover, as this fades from consumers' minds, it reduces the possibility for other retailers and processors to follow similar steps.

So, should food standards be left to the market post Brexit?

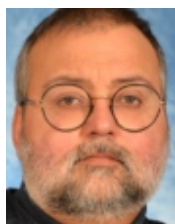
Brexit will probably bring changes to how we import and where we import from. Although many aspects of the new system are still under discussion and given that UK consumers expect the same high food standards after Brexit, there are good reasons to believe that food standards cannot be left to the market. The situation calls for strong intervention to counteract consumer judgement limitation, limited cognitive effort in making food choices and poor information awareness. In other words, *food quality is too important to be left only to consumer choice*.

In this sense, it is positive that the Trade and Agriculture Commission (TAC) will advise, amongst several aspects, on how to make sure that animal welfare and environmental standards in food production are not undermined. However, despite TAC progress on preservation, improvement of several standards such as environmental sustainability requires the continuous active support of consumers.



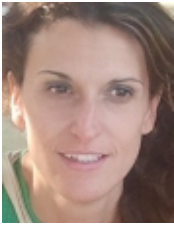
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