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## A great egg-sample

November 20 2011 at 06:07pm  
By Wendy Knowler

**In July 2009 this column featured a piece headlined "Woolworths should say eggsactly what it means".**

The retailer claimed that all its eggs came from free-range chickens, and while this was true of its whole eggs sold in boxes, all the egg in its baked goods and processed foods was liquid egg sourced from battery hens.

My source was Cape Town documentary film-maker Wendy Hardie, whose article on the issue was published online by Compassion in World Farming, South Africa.

Free-range eggs are produced by chickens that are allowed to roam freely within a farmyard or shed, as opposed to factory-farmed chickens, which spend their lives confined to small cages.

At the time, Woolworths said it was not its intention to mislead customers on the issue, but removed the signs.

Divisional food director Julian Novak said the company had decided in 2004 to sell only free-range box eggs – the first and still the only retailer to do so – and to work towards a goal of using only free-range liquid eggs in all its recipes.

The problem is that Woolworths requires 180 000 kilograms of liquid egg every month to do this, and it simply isn't available, because the free-range egg market in South Africa is relatively small.

Towards the end of last year, "made with free-range egg" stickers began appearing on a few Woolworths products, and thanks to a key supplier investing R20 million in a new free-range liquid egg plant, about half of all Woolworths's egg-containing product lines will be made with free-range liquid egg by March.

"This is an amazing milestone, but it's not over," said Woolworths managing director of foods Zyda Rylands at the opening of the plant at Eikenhof poultry farm in Paarl last week.

"This is the latest step on our journey to make good on our promise to use only free-range eggs in our products."

Hardie was among the guests at the launch, having consistently urged Woolworths to speed up the process.

Two-thirds of eggs produced by free-range hens are selected to be sold as whole eggs in boxes, while the remaining third joins the liquid egg production line, because they are unusually shaped, have shells that are soiled with chicken manure or the sawdust they nest in, or have external hairline cracks.

The soiled eggs go through a washing process before the egg is mechanically removed from the shells, then filtered, pasteurised, chilled and packed as liquid egg.

Free-range eggs cost 50 percent more to produce than eggs from battery hens, because of their superior living conditions, but the Woolies products containing free-range liquid egg haven't gone up in price.

While

half the boxed eggs sold in the UK are free-range, less than 5 percent of eggs sold here are.



Less-than-perfect free-range eggs or those with hairline cracks checked on lights in a darkened cubicle join the liquid egg production line.



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