

Does a happy animal taste nicer?

Can you taste whether pigs or chickens had a good life? Hans Spoolder, a researcher at the Animal Sciences Group, and his colleagues are going to try to answer this question.

'People who eat organic products say they taste better,' says Spoolder. 'But is that really the case? And if so, why is that?' Spoolder and his colleagues

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will be studying whether meat from pigs and broiler chickens from extensive livestock farms tastes better than meat from intensive farms. Among other things, the researchers will look at the influence of breeds: different breeds are kept on extensive farms than on intensive farms. Another aspect is the amount of space the animals have to move around. Spoolder: 'Animals that are more mobile may have different muscle tone and better circulation. It might be possible to taste that difference. It has not been studied yet.'

The researchers will also look at the animals' diet. 'Livestock that grazes in a grass field eat a much more varied diet than animals that are fed entirely on feed concentrate. They can eat herbs, for instance, and you can taste those in the meat.' Lastly, the effects of barn or pen enrichment will be considered. 'Animals that play move more, are less stressed and more resistant to infection. That can affect the meat too.'

Detecting fraud

Taste panels will be sampling the meat, and its chemical and physical characteristics will be analysed in the lab. If it turns out that the meat of extensively farmed animals tastes better, there could be scope for a better business model for producers of upmarket meat that scores high on animal welfare.

Because organic meat is more expensive, the risk of fraud is never far away. Spoolder wants to make use of the analysis techniques to detect fraud. 'We will do a comprehensive chemical and physical analysis of the meat. Using that data we can see things like whether an animal has been in a grass field, and what it has eaten. You can even see whether a pig comes from Spain or Italy.' TL

