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REGULATIONS OF THE FRESH VEGETABLES MARKET

REGULACJE RYNKU WARZYW ŚWIEŻYCH

Key words: quality, commercial quality standard, consumer

Słowa kluczowe: jakość, standard jakości handlowej, konsument

Abstract. The market of fresh vegetables is subject to common organisation in the European Union. The regulations of the gardening market and set standards of the commercial quality of fruit and vegetables comply with the basic consumers' requirements. They do not take into account, however, the safety criterion, which according to the consumers was the third most important criterion as regards the choice of lettuce (on average 4.28 in 1-5 scale).

Introduction

The fruit and vegetables market in the European Union is one of the markets with the common organization regulations. The regulation implementation of the common organisation of the fruit and vegetables market in the European Union (Council Regulation (EC) No 2200/96) was done for following reasons: the improvement of products competitiveness on the market and their quality, maintaining of high environmental protection standards and the level of producers income, and reducing the level of intervention in the market. Such policy programme demands from the producers a higher responsibility for their decisions concerning production and, most of all, responsibility for the products quality [www.minrol.gov.pl].

The gardening market regulations for Polish participants of the fresh vegetables market include:

- the payment (subsidies) system which can be used by Polish producers and manufacturers according to the European Commission Regulation (published in 2004) and regulations of the gardening products market organization in Poland (published in 2004) which define:
- the financial support for the assembling and functioning of the producers groups and organizations (fulfilling strictly determined accreditation criteria) and for partial investment costs refund. The producers' groups and organizations may be established in the following categories: fruits and vegetables, vegetables, products for further fabrication and mushrooms,
- the subsidies for fresh products not admitted for the public trade. These subsidies are earmarked for the producers' organizations. In Poland they may be claimed for example in the case of: cauliflowers, tomatoes, aubergines,
- the subsidies for tomatoes fabricated for primary fabrication needs (tomato concentrate, tomatoes in cans, tomato sauces, juices made directly from tomatoes, frozen and dried tomatoes). The subsidies are directed to the producers' groups and organizations having contracts with approved fabricating enterprises,
- the subsidies for fresh and prefabricated (tomatoes) products export,
- the subsidies for sweetening additives for the manufactured vegetables (raw sugar, glucose and glucose syrup),
- the participants of the fresh vegetables market obligations:
- quality demands, which are to be respected by every participant of the fresh vegetables market (quality standards),
- import licenses, which are obligatory for products transport; the import quotas are established (i.e. for garlic, tomato concentrate). These licenses are not obligatory for the fresh gardening products import.

The integration with EU did not change the conditions for fresh and fabricated vegetable sale for EU-15, because on 1 January 2001 customs duties were liquidated. The custom duties in the new member countries were significantly lowered on the basis of bilateral trading agreements.

The commercial quality standards of fruit and vegetables

The products which are meant to be delivered to the consumer in the fresh state should be classified in accordance with the established commercial quality standards. As a realization of the common origination of the markets the standards concerning fresh fruits and vegetables were established. All EU commercial quality standards for particular fruit and vegetables are formulated on the same basis and have the same elements, such as:

- the product description, the Latin name, and the information that the standard does not apply to the product for fabrication purposes,
- the regulations concerning the quality include specifications for the minimum demands for given quality classes (the extra class, the first class and the second class – not for all products all three classes are established); the minimal demands are actually similar for all products; the product should be: whole, healthy, clean, free from pests and damages caused by too high surface humidity, without unintentional smell and flavour, properly developed and ripe),
- the regulations concerning the size demands; they define the minimal and maximal size, and size intervals, which may differ depending on the product, products' variety, commercial type, and also quality class,
- the regulations concerning tolerance,
- the regulations concerning the product presentation (the homogeneity of the product in the package, ways of presentation and packaging),
- the regulations concerning marking (name and address of the packing party and/or product name, variety, origin, size).

The aim, material and methods

The aim of this study was to present commercial quality standards for fresh vegetables focusing on the lettuce case. The chosen study subject will allow us to present the current demands and to present the results of consumers preferences while choosing and using lettuce.

The legislation concerning the fruit and vegetables market and commercial quality standards were the source materials for the analysis. Own research was also carried out on the sample of 1,186 people from Poland who were examined as to the purchase behaviour of the consumers on the market.

The commercial quality standards for lettuces

The commercial quality standards for lettuces [www.minrol.gov.pl] (head lettuces, butterhead and crisphead varieties, iceberg lettuce, Romaine lettuce, looseleaf lettuce, curly lettuce), endives with curly and broad-leaf (Batavian type), are included in the Commission Regulation (EEC) No 1543/2001 of 27 July 2001 with changes to the standards by Commission Regulation (EEC) No 48/2003.

The regulations concerning the quality include the minimal demands and the quality classes description. In all the quality classes of lettuces and endives they should be whole (without damages), healthy (without signs of rotteness), clean (without dirt and other unintentional substances), have a fresh look, not withered, free from pests and damages caused by them, without signs of growing into the seed sprout, without signs of too high surface humidity, without unintentional smell and flavour.

The lettuce size is assessed by their weight and for head lettuces grown in dirt it is 150g, when under shelters 100g, and for crispy lettuces and iceberg lettuces 300g and 200g respectively.

The mentioned features of commercial quality standards are the sensory features of the product. The sensoric evaluation is performed by the buyer. The positive result of the evaluation leads to choosing the product. While purchasing particular elements of the evaluation are analyzed by the consumer, and each element has a different level of importance to him.

Individual criteria for the lettuce choice

To find which and to what extent the criteria of lettuce choice determine the choosing process the respondents were asked to evaluate, using the 1 to 5 scale, each of 16 choice criteria. As a result

individual preferences could be unravelled.

According to the study results freshness was the most important feature when choosing lettuce for purchase. Freshness was given 4.93 score in a scale to 5 by the respondents. There is a very high level of agreement in the group of respondents. No explanation is needed when it comes to the importance of the lettuce freshness because when it is not fresh it is withered and simply useless. It is a basic demand for commercial quality standard.

The second group of factors which received a score higher than 4 were: flavour, safety, colour, and crispiness. Depending on the lettuce specimen its flavour might differ which was taken into account in commercial quality standards and in specifications for package markings with annotation that no unintentional flavours are allowed. The lettuce flavour should be rather associated with its seasoning and preparation way (mostly preferred as part of sandwiches, in salads with other vegetables or in the traditional receipt with cream). For food products (including lettuce) flavour is a feature highly preferred by consumers, often thought to be the most important, as it is decisive for product acceptance (fondness of the product) and by this way the product purchase and consumption [Jeznach 2008, Jeznach 2005a,b, Jeznach 2003a,b].

The high score for the safety issue among the decisive criteria (the third place) is fully understandable, and is in a agreement with the previously presented results of rather frequent and highly frequent concern about food products effect on health (expressed by 61% of the respondents) and risks of vegetables consumption mentioned by respondents such as nitrates concentration (315 answers), heavy metals and pesticides (268 answers).

The food products which are directly consumed, i. e. fresh vegetables including lettuce, require a quality guaranteeing method in the production process. According to Urbaniak (1996) this is a result of three pressure groups influence. The first group is constituted by consumers with growing awareness of nutrition issues and consequently with growing quality demands. The second group are the producers who are aware that the control system does not always work efficiently. A low product quality causes not only the economic loss but it also creates a negative image of the enterprise in the consumers' opinion. The third group is constituted by the governments and international organizations, that above all value the consumers' health and safety.

The guaranteed food product quality notion is defined as planned and systematic actions needed for achieving the expected quality — that is the quality fulfilling the consumers demand. The presented own research of the purchase behaviour (the case study being the lettuce purchase) illustrates these demands. The lettuce was chosen from various vegetables because of its popularity, various forms of use, and its growing consumption. At the same time more and more attention is drawn to the lettuce quality understood as food product safety [Jeznach et al. 1998, Jeznach 2000, Jeznach 2001a,b, Jeznach 2003a,b].

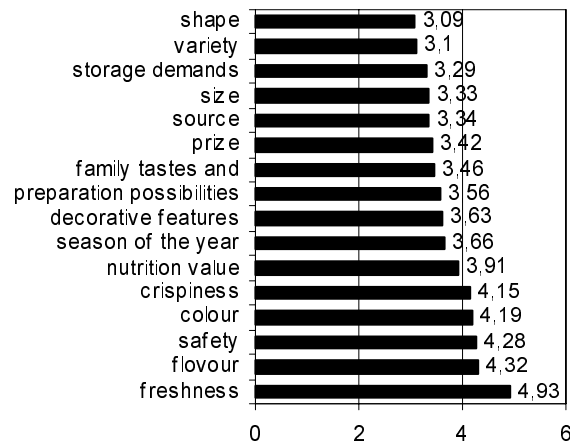


Figure 1. Importance of factors while choosing lettuce
Source: own study.

Conclusions

The high rank of safety among other decisive criteria of lettuce choice shows that food product safety is an important issue for the respondents. However, the food product safety is not included in the commercial quality standards. As the safety factor proves to be very important for the consumers additional safety precautions should be considered.

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Streszczenie

Rynek warzyw świeżych podlega wspólnej organizacji w Unii Europejskiej. Regulacje rynku ogrodniczego oraz określone standardy jakości handlowej owoców i warzyw spełniają podstawowe wymagania konsumentów. Nie uwzględniają jednak bezpieczeństwa, które dla badanych było trzecim co do ważności kryterium wyboru sałaty (średnio 4,28 w skali od 1 do 5).

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