

1.4 QUALITY OF FOOD PRODUCTS

Food products are consumed both owing to man's need to feed, but also from the search for pleasure provided by certain foods or drinks. In the case of unfinished products, one further aspect looked for in food products is the service level, i.e. how easy it is to use or quick to prepare. These three components of the expected quality for food products are listed below.

1.4.1 Nutritional quality

The nutritional quality of a food product depends on the nutritional content of the food product and how safe it is for the consumer's health.

The nutritional value implies both a quantitative aspect, in terms of the number of calories provided by the product per unit weight, and a qualitative aspect given by the composition in nutritive classes, or the relative percentages of carbohydrates, proteins, lipids, vitamins and mineral salts, plus other substances, such as fibres. Each nutritive class can, in turn, be analysed from a qualitative point of view, by taking into consideration the content of essential substances (such as amino acids and fatty acids) and its digestibility.

Wholesomeness, or hygienic quality, corresponds, on the other hand, to the complete absence of toxicity in food products. Leaving aside cases of uncontaminated food products, which become toxic due to improper use by the consumer, it can be said that food products only become toxic by contamination. This contamination may be chemical or bacteriological and can take place at any time during the life cycle of the product due to endogenous or exogenous factors.

Generally speaking, nutritional quality is deemed the acceptable minimum, that is, an indispensable condition for trading a product. This means that the nutritional content of a particular product must be consistent with its category and absolute wholesomeness. As the acceptable minimum, nutritional quality is at a lower level than expected quality therefore the consumer tends to take it for granted. Or consumers only take it into consideration when deciding whether or not to try out products in that particular category. This is why nutritional quality is normally standardized by law, especially regarding the aspects affecting its wholesomeness.

In some cases, however, nutritional quality is a condition for excellence. This is the case of special products, either of registered origin or, more generally, the products that, within their category, distinguish themselves by offering advantages for the consumer.