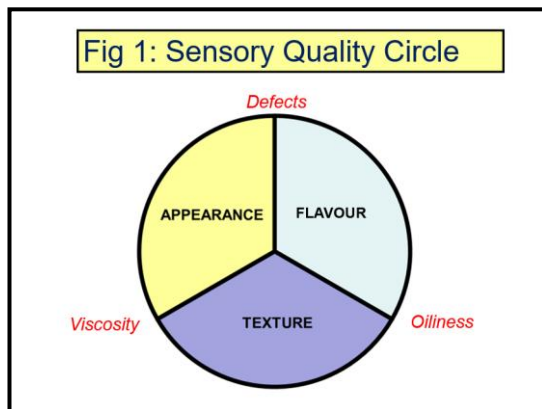




Issue 49: September 2025: This e-bulletin is aimed at personnel in fisheries & aquaculture, at fish packers, processors, retailers, health professionals & finally, consumers.

Seafood display – iced counters vs prepacks

Appearance is one of the cornerstones of food sensory quality and is often displayed in circular form together with flavour and texture, and so-called interface areas oiliness, viscosity and defects (Fig 1) (Kramer & Gormley 1972). For example, defects can be seen (appearance) but also tasted (flavour) while seafood chowder soup



thickness/thinness can be judged visually (appearance) but also sensed in the mouth (texture). Appearance is by far the most important as it is the first human sense involved i.e. 'seeing is believing'. And so it is with fish displays i.e. fish in ice counters are highly visible while those in prepacks are more 'enclosed'.

Ice counters

Fish ice counters are highly visual and are an attractive way of



displaying seafood. However, they are a declining feature in Irish retail outlets. This change may be due to the cost of maintaining a high quality fish counter in terms of icing, artistic display of fish, rotation of displayed fish and level of labour required. Ice counters

have to be maintained throughout the day in terms of re-icing, keeping fish surface damp to avoid desiccation, and then thoroughly cleaned each evening before closedown after unsold fish has been removed to cold storage. Ice counters allow consumers to carefully inspect and even smell the fish they are purchasing. Fresh fish has a pleasant seaweed-like smell without any amine/ammonia odours. In well maintained ice counters there is no fishy smell in the vicinity; in others there is a heavy fishy smell indicating poor practice and stale fish. Relatively few Irish seafood restaurants have

ice counters displaying their seafoods. This contrasts with mainland Europe, e.g. Brussels where most seafood restaurants have iced seafood displays on the street for potential customers to view.

Prepacked fish

The decline in ice counters has been balanced by an increase in prepacked fish. Prepacks are highly convenient for store operatives and for consumers alike and each pack carries a use-by date.



Freeze-chilling is a useful adjunct for retailers as it 'gives time' to the system whereas chilling on its own leaves little room for time flexibility. In freeze-chilling, frozen fish or frozen prepacks can be stored by retailers in their deep freeze-rooms until required for sale. Prepacks/fish can then be introduced to the ice counter early in the morning and allowed thaw, or in

the case of prepacks introduced to the chill counter before store closure and allowed thaw to chill temperature by morning. Use-by dates are put on frozen prepacks by store operatives as advised by the suppliers, when the prepacks are introduced to the chill cabinets (Fagan et al., 2003; Gormley 2022).

Shelf life of iced & prepacked fish

A small study on the freshness of iced and prepacked fish on sale in retail outlets in the Dublin region was conducted by Tobin & Gormley in 2016. The conclusions are highly relevant in the current article and were as follows: (i) consumers should cook iced counter fish on day of purchase or the day after; (ii) use-by dates of 5 to 7 days on prepacks may too long for some species; (iii) tests for amine/ammonia odour compounds indicated that 44% of the 36 samples tested were on the stale side; (iv) reintroducing unsold fish to the ice counter for a second or third day is not recommended.

References:

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