

This Is the Reason Why Americans Refrigerate Eggs and Europeans Don't *By Reader's Digest Editors*



The most important part is keeping harmful bacteria at bay. But does that mean you have to refrigerate? Not the way Europeans do it.

In the good ole U.S. of A., practically everything goes into the fridge—including foods that would be better off on the counter or in the cupboard. And then we hear something that rocks our world: Europeans keep their eggs on the counter. In fact, they strongly recommend against refrigerating eggs. What gives? Two different philosophies about preventing the same nasty bug—that's what.

At the root of the issue is salmonella, one of the most common causes of bacterial food poisoning. It can run rampant through chicken farms, turning up on the outside of eggs thanks to contamination from dirt and feces; more insidious is when it's inside the shell thanks to the bacteria infecting a hen's ovaries. To combat the problem, back in the 1970s, the U.S. perfected egg washing: After laying, the eggs go straight to a machine where they're shampooed with soap and hot water. This steamy shower washes away any potential salmonella, but it also strips the eggs of a thin coating called a cuticle. Without this protective layer, the eggs can't keep water and oxygen in, or harmful bacteria out. So the eggs are refrigerated to combat infection.

European food safety experts took a different tack: They left the cuticle intact, made it illegal for egg producers to wash eggs, discouraged refrigeration (which can cause mildew growth—and bacterial contamination—should the eggs sweat as they come back to room temps), and started a program of vaccinating chickens against salmonella. The approach appears to be effective: In

2000, the U.K. had more than 14,000 egg-related cases of food poisoning; in more recent years, after their egg safety measures had been widely adopted, the number had dropped to 8,000. The U.S. has about 79,000 cases, but with a much larger population, of course.

There are objective and subjective pros and cons to room-temp eggs versus refrigerated ones. When refrigerated, eggs have a longer shelf life—they're good for about 21 days on the counter, and nearly 50 in the icebox. Refrigeration, however, means the eggs can absorb odors and flavors from other foods in there; countertop connoisseurs claim the room-temp eggs taste better. But if you keep eggs stored in their carton, and minimize the amount of smelly food in your fridge, off flavors shouldn't be an issue. Some chefs believe room-temperature eggs to be ideal for baking; it's why you'll see recipes recommending you bring eggs to room temp before mixing.

If you want to try room-temp eggs, head down to the local farmers' market and talk to the sellers down there. Chances are they haven't washed or refrigerated the eggs, the cuticle is intact, and you could keep the eggs on the counter. See if you can tell the difference—just remember to practice consistency: If an unwashed egg goes in the fridge, it should stay there until you're ready to use it.