

# What cage-free means with Braam Malherbe

 By Cari Van Wyk

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Braam Malherbe recently joined Angus McIntosh and Yolanda Guse, who started the petition to get McDonalds to commit to a cage-free policy, on the Spier Spier Biodynamic Farm to see how free range chickens live. With growing consumer demand for transparency about where their food comes from and how it is produced, we asked Malherbe to elaborate on the difference between battery cage, free range, and cage free chickens.



***Battery cage farming is self-explanatory, but what are the key differences between free range and cage free?***

Cage-free hens can spread their wings and engage in many more natural activities. However, they may not have access to the outdoors. Free range operations, on the other hand, allow hens varying levels of access to the outdoors. Most people are unaware that caged hens endure a great deal of pain. Their toes are cut off to prevent scratching each other and their beak tips are seared off with a heat guillotine. They are crammed into small cages and many die. The dead hens are minced and fed to pigs.

***What is South Africa's policy on this and how free range is defined?***

There are no free range regulation standards in South Africa, but free-range is generally understood to mean a non-caged system with some level of outdoor access.

***A lot of food retailers put "free range" on their products to reassure consumers who care about where their food comes from and how it's produced. If there are no free range regulation standards in SA, what does the free range stamp really mean?***

Unfortunately, there are no animal welfare certification schemes in South Africa at this time. However, when companies adopt cage-free policies, you can at least be confident that the animals have the space to spread their wings, walk, jump, lay their eggs in nests, and experience many other natural behaviours.

■ ***What are the main detriments to battery cage farming to the animal? And how does this influence the quality and nutrition of chicken products?***

It is difficult to truly account for the degree and amount of suffering that hens experience while raised in a small, wired cage. The cages generally hold five to ten birds at once and each hen is given less space than the area of a letter-sized sheet of paper in which to eat, sleep, lay eggs and defecate. The confinement makes it impossible for them to engage in nearly all of their natural behaviour, including dustbathing, foraging, or nesting - the most significant source of frustration for battery caged hens.

You actually don't need to know anything about a hen's biological needs to understand the situation they are in. Imagine spending 24 hours in an elevator with nine other people. Now imagine that 24 hours being stretched for your entire life.

In terms of quality of the product, many people find a positive difference in the taste and texture of eggs from hens who have a decent quality of life. On balance, the scientific evidence suggests that caged hens have increased Salmonella infection risks.

■ ***What are the main reasons companies like McDonalds SA are not adopting a cage-free policy and putting pressure on farmers to practice farming methods with animal welfare in mind?***

It's actually strange that McDonalds SA has not moved forward and adopted a cage-free policy. McDonalds in many other countries – as well as numerous other food companies worldwide – have taken this step. It's clear consumers want higher welfare products. Moreover, we are seeing investment banks, governments and producer organisations demanding eggs be sourced in a more humane way, so I'm not sure what is holding McDonalds SA back.



■ ***McDonald's SA stated that they are exploring the viability of committing to McDonald's cage-free policy. Why do investigations to explore the viability of adopting a cage-free policy take so long? Has any progress been made?***

This is a question that needs to be asked of McDonald's South Africa, as they have already adopted cage-free policies the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Russia, and across the European Union. There really is no need for further study.

■ ***McDonalds SA's statement in reaction to their international counterparts committing to cage-free eggs says: "We source our farm fresh eggs directly from our own farms and suppliers who meet McDonalds' stringent quality and food safety standards." What does this mean, do we know what quality and food safety standards are?***

This means nothing in terms of animal welfare, as their current suppliers confine hens for their entire lives in small, cramped battery cages. Since we know that the incidence of Salmonella is higher in caged facilities, they clearly also lack a sufficiently strong food safety policy.

■ ***What role can consumers play to push companies like McDonalds to make the transition to cage-free farming?***

Companies like McDonalds will respond to consumer demand. If you care about the welfare of hens, let companies know. Email them. Tell the Manager when you are in the store. Post something on their Facebook page. Or simply spend your money somewhere else. The power of the consumer is huge. We all need to move away from an apathetic stance to one of action. My [DOT](#) (Do One Thing) campaign is about this exact thing. If we all Do One Thing, collectively, we change things. It was once said; 'evil prevails when good people do nothing.'

■ ***Educating consumers are increasingly important, but educating companies on the benefits of a cage-free policy seem equally important. What are the benefits of cage-free farming for commercial farms and retailers?***

Consumers are increasingly informed about the ways in which their food is produced, and make choices based on that information. Battery cages have no support from consumers. Companies that move to adopt cage-free policies earlier rather than later will have a greater market advantage – capturing and retaining the growing number of customers who care about farm animal welfare. It is vital that we, as humans, speak out for the species that can't.

To sign the petition and help McDonalds commit to cage-free, please click [HERE](#).

## ABOUT CARI VAN WYK

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.

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