



Quality Loss in Minimally Processed Swiss Chard Related to Amount of Damaged Area

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Whole leaves of Swiss chard and leaves cut into 2, 3 and 4 cm wide strips were stored at 4 °C and 98% relative humidity for 11 d. Water, weight and chlorophyll concentration decreased continuously during storage, with losses depending on the degree of processing injury and relating to the damaged area per unit volume rather than to exposed area. Titratable acids and soluble solids contents presented greater decreases in the first 3 d of storage; thereafter their evolution did not show a definite tendency.

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Introduction

Swiss chard (*Beta vulgaris*, type *cycla*) is a leafy vegetable highly appreciated in Argentine cuisine for its nutritional properties and year round supply. Although it is similar to spinach and both products are used interchangeably in most food preparations, consumers favour Swiss chard for its lower price. Quality of whole, fresh Swiss chard leaves is highly dependent on the temperature and humidity of the storage atmosphere. Storage at low temperature (4 °C) and high levels of relative humidity (RH: > 87%) are necessary to delay weight, water and chlorophyll loss, and to help maintain sensory attributes (1). Spoilage of leafy vegetables is associated with high respiration and water loss rates (2). Texture of green vegetables usually becomes unacceptable when they lose about 2% of their water content (3). Water loss is a major cause of deterioration because it results not only in direct quantitative loss (loss of salable weight), but also in loss in appearance (wilting and shriveling), textural quality (softening, flaccidity, limpness, loss of crispness and juiciness) and nutritional quality (2). Retention of green colour is an obvious indicator of the quality of leafy vegetables and is considered to have great impact on consumer selection (4, 5). For green vegetables,

chlorophyll content is associated with greenness. Market quality retention in vegetables is affected by many factors, including postharvest processing, storage time and conditions such as temperature, RH, light and composition of the atmosphere (6, 7). Fresh-cut vegetables are generally much more perishable than intact products. The changes that occur during senescence of these products are induced or enhanced by the physical action of processing. They take place particularly in tissues adjacent to those that are damaged by the cutting action, when acids and hydrolyzing enzymes of the vacuoles are released (8, 9). Bolin and Huxsoll reported that size reduction, required for preparing salad lettuce, shortens storage life of cut lettuce compared to uncut lettuce (10). They found that thin 3-mm slices of shredded lettuce respired more rapidly and had a shorter shelf life than salad-cut lettuce. Cutting lettuce leaves causes a rupturing of the cells resulting in an exudation of cellular fluids. This causes acceleration in the physiological breakdown of the lettuce and a shortened storage life. The effect of piece size was also noticed when lettuce was shredded 1 mm and 3 mm thick (11).

Although there is information on the storage conditions for whole chard leaves (1, 2) and on the effect of processing on the storage life of leafy vegetables (10, 11), no information was found on the effect of cutting on chard. Moreover, the effect of the piece size on the rate of deterioration of processed leafy vegetables has received little attention. The purpose of the present work was to investigate how the piece size of cut chard affects its storage life. To assess changes in the quality of chard,

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chlorophyll content, moisture and weight loss, pH, titratable acidity and soluble solid content were analysed for whole and cut chard.

Materials and Methods

Raw material and sample preparation

Fresh Swiss chard (*Beta vulgaris*, type *cycla*) was obtained from local producers. Leaves were received at our laboratory 40–60 min after harvest. After sorting for integrity, uniformity of colour and size, chard leaves were separated into four lots. In one of them (A) chard leaves were left whole; in the other lots chard leaves were cut into 4 cm (B), 3 cm (C) and 2 cm (D) wide strips. Cuts perpendicular to the midrib were made with a sharp knife. For any strip the volume is $l \times w \times \delta$ where l is the length, w is the width and δ is the thickness. The damaged area is $2 \times l \times \delta$. Therefore, the damage area per unit volume is $2/w$, resulting in values of 0, 0.5, 0.67 and 1 cm^{-1} for lots A, B, C and D, respectively. Immediately after cutting, samples were soaked in a water-chlorine solution (0.2 g of $\text{Cl}_2/1000 \text{ g H}_2\text{O}$) at $1-3^\circ\text{C}$ for 2 min. Surface moisture was removed with a manual salad centrifuge.

Sample storage

Holding boxes, with overall dimensions of $0.4 \times 0.3 \times 0.3 \text{ m}$, were made of heavy-duty, 0.60 cm thick, transparent acrylic. To create an atmosphere of ca. 98% RH, a beaker with saturated potassium sulphate solution in equilibrium with unsolved potassium sulphate was placed in each box. Boxes were stored at $4 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$. Chard samples were placed in two layers on $0.29 \times 0.29 \text{ m}$ plastic mesh frames. This disposition was chosen to allow unrestricted interaction between the samples and the holding atmosphere, so that the effect of the damaged area would not be masked by protecting holding surfaces or adjacent chard layers. Twelve frames were placed in each holding box.

Quality evaluation

A set of three frames from each damage condition was weighed throughout the experiment to determine weight loss.

At each storage time, assessed samples were removed for the different analyses. For moisture and chlorophyll determinations, stems were removed and the green tissue was ground with a home food grinder (BGH, 390094, Argentina). Moisture was determined by the weight lost by 10 g samples after 24 h at 80°C (12). Total chlorophyll content was determined using an adaption of the spectrophotometric assay described by Barth *et al.* (13). Ground chard tissue (3 g) was extracted in 18 mL acetone: 1 mL 0.1 mol/L NH_4OH solution using a homogenizer at 60 rpm for 1 min under cold conditions (5°C). Homogenates were stored in the dark prior to centrifugation. Homogenate was centrifuged under $1000 \times g$ in 30 mL tubes for 5 min at 5°C . Supernatant was decanted

and aliquots were transferred to 4 mL cuvettes (1 cm light path) prior to reading absorbance at 642.5 and 660 nm in a spectrophotometer (Shimadzu Corporation, UV-1601 PC UV-Visible, Kyoto, Japan). Total chlorophyll was expressed as mg of total chlorophyll/100 g of vegetable sample on a wet basis.

The juice of 30 g of Swiss chard was obtained with a home juice extractor (BGH, 390050, Argentina) and centrifuged at $1000 \times g$ for 5 min. Juice samples were diluted (1:1) with distilled water. The pH of the diluted samples was measured with a benchtop conductivity/pH meter (Jenco Electronics Ltd, Model 1671, Taiwan). The diluted samples were also titrated to pH 8.1 with 0.1 mol/L NaOH (14). Titratable acidity was calculated as g malic acid/100 g sample.

The soluble solids content in juice samples was determined in triplicate using an Abbe refractometer (Atago Co. Ltd., 976440 Tokyo, Japan) (15).

All assays were performed in triplicate.

Results and Discussion

Since water content is critical for leafy vegetables, we evaluated water losses during storage of chard. Water content in samples during storage is presented in **Fig. 1**. Although the rate of loss appears to change for the practical range of storage times, a constant rate, represented by a straight line, is assumed. Greater water losses were always related to samples with higher damaged area per unit volume. In the respiration process, water is produced and retained by the food (16), so the respiration increase associated with the physical damage would not be responsible for the losses observed. In addition, changes in water content would not be principally attributable to dehydration because samples were stored under an atmosphere close to saturation. Nevertheless, it is known that transpiration rate is influenced not only by environmental factors but also by commodity factors such as surface-to-volume ratio and surface injuries (2). Water loss of chard lots can be attributed to: a) evaporation of a moisture layer that persists on the vegetable surface after washing; b) leakage of cellular fluids caused by mechanical damage (8); and c) increase of permeability of cell membranes enhanced by ethylene (8). The first of these factors is dependent on the exposed area per volume unit, while the leakage of cellular fluids and the permeability increase are related to the damage area per volume unit. Increases in the damaged area due to processing affect the organized surface on the tissue, accelerating the rate of water loss from the vegetable (17). In our experimental system, the damaged area is a small fraction of the overall exposed area. Therefore the differences between lots suggest that water loss could be attributed to cellular fluid leakage due to direct mechanical damage or to enhanced cell membrane permeability. The slopes of the tendency lines in **Fig. 1** represent the different water loss rates. In **Fig. 2**, these slopes were plotted against the corresponding damaged areas per unit volume calculated as indicated in the Materials and Methods section. The high correlation found between

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