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2024
MEAT SNACK
REPORT

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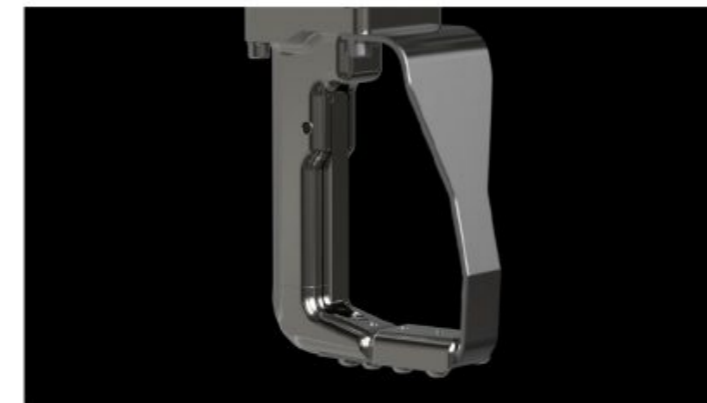
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APRIL 2024 / VOLUME 237 / ISSUE 4



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COVER STORY

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State-level labeling regulations proceed along with federal efforts.



Danette Amstein
Principal/Co-founder, Midan Marketing

MIDAN MARKETING'S DANETTE AMSTEIN DISCUSSES PROTEIN PRODUCT MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

During the Annual Meat Conference 2024, a record crowd received an in-depth overview of the current and emerging marketplace for meat and poultry products. Danette Amstein, principal and co-founder of Midan Marketing, shares some insights on how these market trends will unfold.

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TOP-VIEWED NEW CONSUMER PRODUCTS:

1. Panera introduces two new melts
2. Hormel Foods ups its pizza topping game with Ribbon Pepperoni rollout
3. BUBBA burger adds chicken burger to lineup
4. Vermont Smoke & Cure debuts four new meat snack offerings at Expo West
5. Smashburger launches new LTO, the Mango Habanero Crispy Chicken Sandwich



MOST-POPULAR FEATURES:

1. Consumers and marketers remain bullish on burgers
2. Leaders of Tomorrow honorees introduced during AMC 2024
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5. Meat sales maintain strong start for 2024



1. Episode 169: Taking a holistic approach to poultry health
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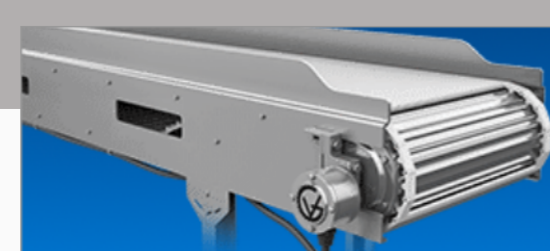
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THE POWER OF MEAT SNACKS

Several of the recent The Power of Meat 2024 survey's Top 10 takeaways are relevant for products in the meat snacks category in particular:

- Shopping for meat/poultry is a balancing act between money, time, nutrition, taste and meal occasion.
- Seven in 10 consumers believe meat is an overall healthy choice that provides fuel and essential nutrients.
- 91% of consumers can be persuaded to spend a little more on meat and poultry.



FRED WILKINSON

The last point underscores the value consumers find in meat snacks, which pound for pound are not the lowest-price meat products a shopper could buy.

Check out Associate Editor Sammy Bredar's Meat Snacks Report 2024 and learn more about how the category is positioning itself to satisfy consumer needs.

Also, make sure to take a look at our Processor Profile of Missouri-based Zimmerman Quality Meats, where expansions and upgrades are opening up new co-packing opportunities.





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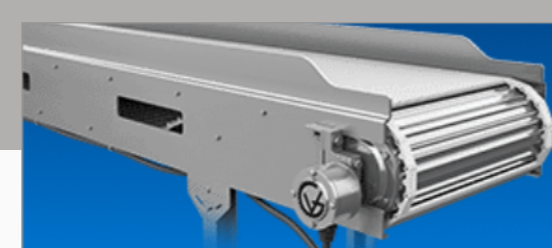


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DEMAND FOR HEALTHY PROTEIN DRIVES THE MEAT SNACK CATEGORY

AS CONSUMER DEMAND FOR ON-THE-GO, CONVENIENT FOOD OPTIONS RISES, MEAT SNACKS ARE SHOWING THEMSELVES TO BE A ONE-STOP-SHOP SOLUTION, GIVING CONSUMERS EVERYTHING THEY WANT OUT OF THEIR FOOD PRODUCTS.

BY SAMMY BREDAR
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Consumers want it all—and why shouldn't they? We see consumers increasingly concerned with their food's sourcing, nutritional value, convenience, quality and flavor. As consumer demand for on-the-go, convenient food options rises, meat snacks are showing themselves to be a one-stop-shop solution, giving consumers everything they want out of their food products.

To gain insights into all things meat snacks, The National Provisioner consulted with the American Association of Meat Processors, Old Trapper and Chomps.

According to The Brainsy Insights, meat snacks are performing well in North American due to rising demand for snacking products as well as healthy food offerings. With many brands focusing on clean-label, "better-for-you" meat snacks, the category is well-positioned to fulfill consumer demand.

The emphasis on clean-label, "better-for-you" meat snacks is known as "premiumization." According to Straits Research, "The process through which producers make a product more desirable to consumers by stressing its greater quality and uniqueness is known as premiumization ... Customers are more likely to purchase high-quality items or services when per capita income rises."

Though many Americans are facing economic struggle, the success of the typically higher-priced "better-for-you" category emphasizes the strong consumer demand for healthy, clean-label protein products.

To successfully market meat snack products, producers can emphasize product quality. Family-owned Old Trapper embraces this form of marketing, ensuring they highlight the quality and transparency of their meat snacks. "This is a key part of our messaging - that our jerky and sticks include high quality beef and ingredients, and we are transparent on exactly what is inside each bag," said Robert Leary, chief marketing officer at Old Trapper.

Regarding flavor trends, AAMP Outreach Specialist Nelson Gaydos noted the popularity of "sweet and heat" offerings. He also recommended experimenting with unusual or ethnic flavors for meat snack products.

Stacey Hartnett, vice president of e-commerce and marketing for Chomps, shared her insights on current flavor trends for meat snacks. She said, "Generally speaking, bold and smoky flavors are trending; not limited to meat snacks but flavor fusion (ex. hot honey), nostalgic indulgence, and International Flavors." As Hartnett noted, these flavor trends are hot across the board for protein products, emphasizing the enduring popularity of these flavors and combinations.

Though new and trending flavors can create market opportunities for meat snacks, consumers also value their tried-and-true original meat snack flavors. Old Trapper noted that their consumers enjoy the consistency of Old Trapper's signature flavors, including Old Fashioned, Teriyaki, Peppered and Hot & Spicy.

"The Old Fashioned flavor has always been trending and doesn't appear to be stopping," Leary said. Old Trapper is a prime example of tradition over innovation—while new and exciting flavors can drive growth, sometimes, it's good to stay true to what works.

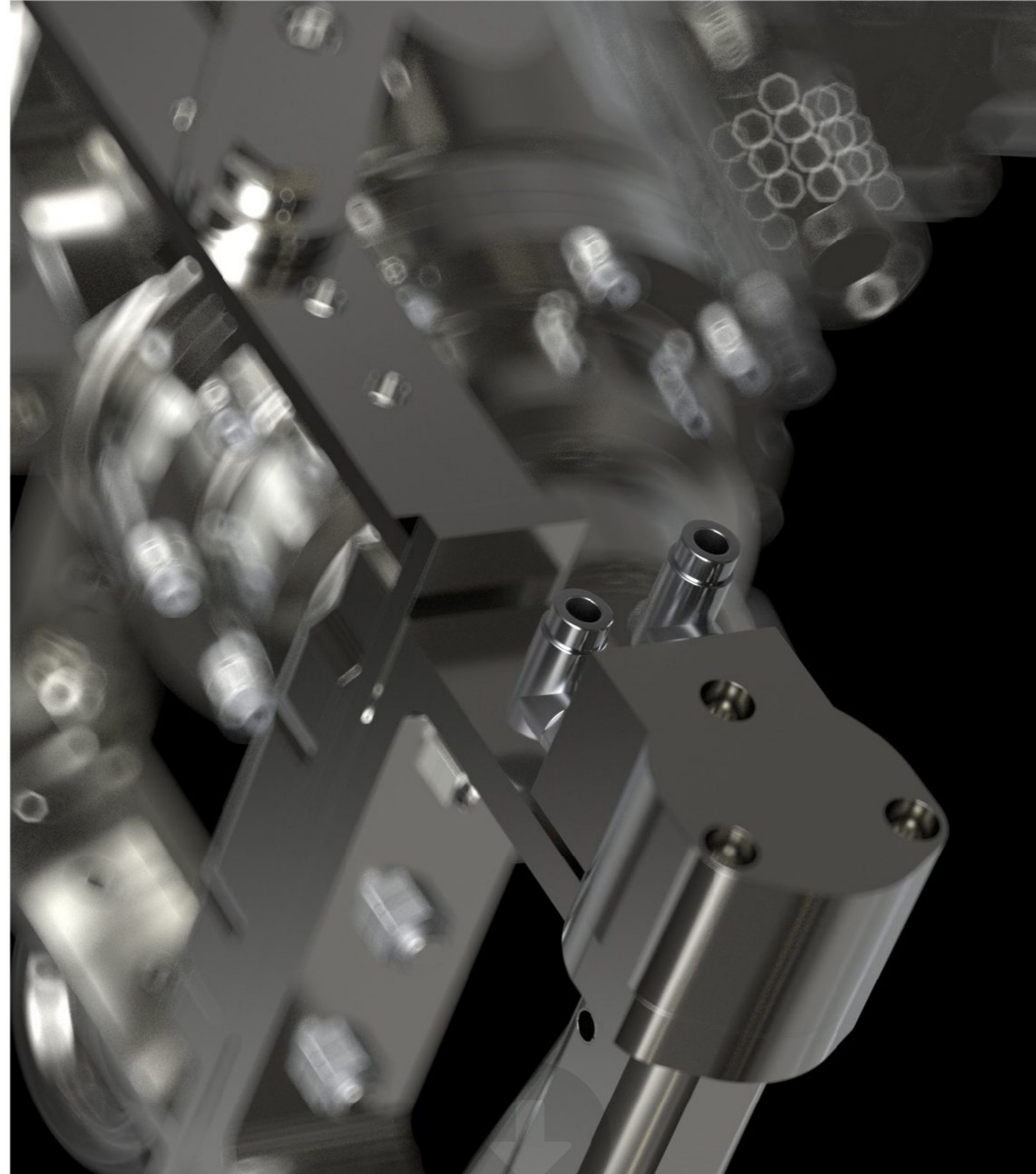
Though jerky has dominated the meat snack market, snack sticks are on the rise. According to The Brainsy Insights, "Sticks are forecasted to be the fastest-growing segment in the market. Owing to increasing preference towards chicken-based meat sticks in the market."

It can be harder for smaller processors to compete with larger processors who may have more financial resources. For those smaller processors, Gaydos recommended focusing on quality over quantity. "Small batches provide the opportunity for experimentation with trends and limited time offerings. I don't think the McRib would be as popular if it were available year-round."

For processors of all sizes, Gaydos recommended experimenting with different kinds of meat snacks—fermented and/or acidified snack sticks, as well as refrigerated versus shelf-stable products.

Opening image, 3rd and 4th images courtesy of Chomps

Second image courtesy of Old Trapper



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Organic meats can leverage the success of organic products in other categories, says Pete Lewis, chief marketing officer for Open Range Beef.

MEATS CLAIM SMALL SLICE OF ORGANIC MEAT

CATEGORY'S BRAND EQUITY REMAINS STRONGEST AMONG GEN Z AND MILLENNIAL CONSUMERS.

BY FRED WILKINSON
CHIEF EDITOR

The meat/fish/poultry category accounts for 4% of the market for organic food products in the US, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

In fact, the /fish/poultry category comes in last place among the major food categories for organic sales, with produce accounting for 40% of US organic food sales in 2021, followed by dairy and eggs at 13%, beverages at 12%, packaged/prepared foods at 11% bread/grains at 9% and snack foods at 6%.

The /fish/poultry category's sales even trail organic condiments (5%).

Organic meats can leverage the success of organic products in other categories, said Pete Lewis, chief marketing officer for Open Range Beef.

"A natural cross-merchandising opportunity is to create dishes using organic proteins and organic vegetables," Lewis said. "Organic produce is readily available at most retailers and enjoys even broader consumer adoption."

In addition, Lewis said there's a growing range of organic spices, marinades, and other ingredients available at retail that can be a good merchandising fit with organic meats.



COST CHALLENGES CLEAN LABEL

Acosta Group's recent Clean Label Insights Study finds that 83% of shoppers are already knowledgeable about clean label products or have heard the term.

Although not officially defined, marketers position clean label products as having as few ingredients as possible, having easy-to-recognize ingredients, and having no artificial ingredients or synthetic chemicals.

"Cleaner labels' and 'no sugar' are a reflection of the consumer's desire to shop with their values – they want their products to be unadulterated and preferably not mass-produced," Lewis said. "Natural and organic proteins fit squarely into this overall approach for consumers making conscientious food choices. Consumers are increasingly learning about regenerative food production and seeking it out. It takes the concept of 'do no harm' toward a more holistic 'do more good' for both consumers and food producers."

The Acosta Group study finds the biggest challenge to clean label purchases is cost, with shoppers finding the products are too expensive or they question the value of the products' clean-label claims.

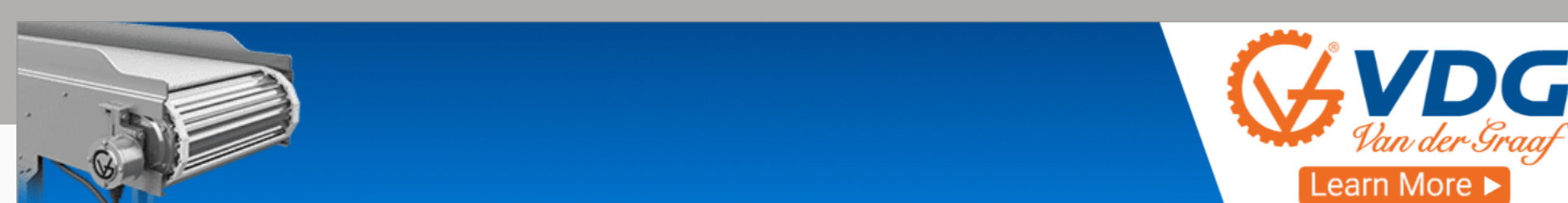
Clean label product purchasers skew younger overall, with Acosta Group market research suggesting that Gen Z and Millennials say they expect to buy more of these products in the future, positioning them as clean label's strongest advocates.

"The continued growth in natural and organic proteins is less so a trend: It reflects the Millennial and Gen Z consumers' broadly held values and how they approach buying many products, not just proteins," Lewis said.

Data has shown that consumers who value the attributes of natural and organic protein continue to pay a premium above conventional beef, Lewis said.

"We've also seen additional attributes translate to additional sales as well – our customer Heinen's saw 30% volume sales growth year over year after replacing their existing imported Organic grass-fed program with Spring Lake Ranch, our super-premium Organic, 100% grass-fed product that's born, raised, and harvested in the US – despite a substantively higher shelf price than the previous program."

Opening image credit: Fred Wilkinson



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PUTTING *E. COLI* IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

FOOD SCIENTISTS AND PROFESSIONALS HAVE MADE GREAT STRIDES TO IDENTIFY, TACKLE AND SOLVE THE ONCE-PERSISTENT THREAT OF *E. COLI* CONTAMINATION IN RAW MEAT PRODUCTS.

BY SHAWN K. STEVENS
FOOD INDUSTRY COUNSEL LLC

In the 25 years I have been representing and defending the food industry, I have witnessed some spectacular industry accomplishments, and a few notable failures. Fortunately, over this lengthy period, the stunning accomplishments have far outweighed the few times where industry did not find success. As I look back on those last 25 years, and look forward to the next, one conclusion I am very comfortable making is that we are truly blessed to have the safest food supply in the entire world.

To test this conclusion, and while preparing to write this article, I used our dataset (www.foodrecallreporter.com) to detail the numbers of recalls of USDA-regulated products over the last 25 years for the suspected presence of pathogenic *E. coli*. What I observed was a testament to the amazing work that food scientists and professionals have done to identify, tackle, and then solve the once-persistent issue of *E. coli* contamination in raw meat products.

Where did it all start? Well, with the 1993-94 Jack-in-the-Box outbreak, of course. What followed were new policies in 1994 declaring *E. coli* O157:H7 to be an adulterant in ground beef, the imposition in 1999 of HACCP on the beef industry, and the unveiling, at the same time, of CDC's PulseNet, allowing for the realtime detection of emerging foodborne illness outbreaks.

What followed, quickly began to turn everyone's head, including consumers, media, and the regulators. Indeed, in the few short years between 2000 and 2003, there were more than 100 recalls of raw meat products for the presence of *E. coli* O157:H7. Unfortunately, some of those recalls were triggered by foodborne illness outbreaks which were, in most cases, linked back to the offending products.

During those early years (and, in the years that followed), I staunchly defended beef companies accused of causing foodborne illness outbreaks in cases that were both threatened and/or filed throughout the U.S. Indeed, Bill Marler and I got to know each other very well. And, as the years churned on, and the cases continued to be filed by plaintiff lawyers, I continued to watch in awe as the beef industry worked tirelessly to find solutions to the *E. coli* O157:H7 conundrum. At first, the hard work did not yield impressive results. While the stats were getting better than what was observed just a few years earlier, there were still 78 recalls, between 2007 and 2011, because of the presence of *E. coli* O157:H7 in raw beef.

Then, in 2011, FSIS changed the rules further, declaring that the presence of "The Big Six" Non-O157 STECs (*E. coli* O26, O11, O103, O121, O45 and O145) in ground beef would render the products adulterated. Notably, however, because the presence of these other *E. coli* strains typically had the same underlying cause as O157, industry's ongoing strategies to combat *E. coli* generally did not change much.

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But, what did change, in the years that followed, was the prevalence of *E. coli* in raw ground products. Industry's interventions and strategies were finally beginning to pay off. From 2012 to 2019, there were only, on average, five recalls of raw beef for the presence of *E. coli* O157:H7 each year. And the success continued. During the four-year period between 2020 and the date of this article, the suspected presence of *E. coli* O157:H7 has only triggered a total of seven recalls. Oh my, how times have changed!

So, as I often do, I would like to take a moment to reflect on our journey together, and thank industry for such a phenomenal accomplishment. *E. coli* was once a glaring distraction in industry's windshield and, through persistence and hard work, it is now fading further and further away in the rearview mirror.

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KEYNOTE SESSIONS



Sharks Don't Swim Backwards
by Rob Sharkey



Personal Branding: Maximizing Performance in the Workplace
by Paul Davis



Less but Better - Meat will Become the Luxury Food of the Future
by Lars Hinrichsen, Ph.D.



Celebrating Science
by Michele Payn

TECHNICAL SESSIONS

- Meat and Muscle Biology
- Basic and Applied Meat Processing
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DESCRIPTIVE BEEF FLAVOR ATTRIBUTES AND CONSUMER ACCEPTANCE RELATIONSHIPS FOR HEAVY BEEFEATERS

BEEF FLAVOR IS NOT A SINGLE ATTRIBUTE BUT MAY BE COMPOSED OF MORE THAN 30 ATTRIBUTES DEFINED IN THE BEEF FLAVOR LEXICON.

Prior to 2010, improvements in tenderness, and variability in beef tenderness was considered the main eating quality attribute for beef. As beef tenderness improved, it became evident that differences in beef flavor was becoming a more important driver of consumer liking. However, beef flavor is not a single attribute but may be composed of more than 30 attributes defined in the beef flavor lexicon in 2011. While this was a valuable tool, the relationship between individual beef flavor attributes and consumer liking were not known, especially for frequent users or heavy beefeaters. Our objective was to understand relationships between beef flavor attributes from the beef lexicon, determine their relationships to consumer acceptability, and define attributes that were either positively or negatively related to consumer liking for heavy beefeaters.

Sixteen treatments were used to create differences in beef flavor. Steaks and roasts from three beef muscles (Choice top loin steaks; Choice high pH (>6.0) top loin steaks; Choice top sirloin steaks; and Choice and Select bottom round roasts) were used from 10 USDA Choice, 10 USDA Select, and 10 high pH beef carcasses. Steaks and roasts were cut from subprimals aged 14 days and randomly assigned endpoint cook temperature (58° or 80°). Steaks were cooked either on a George Foreman clamshell grill or a commercial flat grill, and bottom round roasts were cooked in a Crock Pot. Within a carcass and treatment, one steak or roast was used for descriptive beef flavor sensory evaluation, and four steaks or roasts were randomly assigned to consumer evaluation in Philadelphia; Houston; Olathe, Kan.; or Portland, Ore.

The descriptive beef flavor attribute panel evaluated 29 flavor aromatics, but only 10 aromatics (beef identity, brown/roasted, bloody/serummy, fat-like, metallic, liver-like, overall sweet, cardboardy, warmed over flavor, sour milk/sour dairy), and five basic tastes (umami, sweet, salty, sour and bitter) were detectable. Cooked samples were cut into 1.27 x 1.27 x 2.54 sections and two sections per sample were served to either descriptive or consumer panelists.

Consumers (n = 280) were randomly selected to eat beef three or more times per week. Consumers evaluated eight samples and four consumers evaluated from each steak or roast. The ballot included overall liking, overall flavor liking, beefy flavor liking and intensity, grilled flavor liking and intensity, and off flavor intensity rankings using a nine-point end- and centered-anchored hedonic scales. Slightly more females participated than males and age ranged from 18 to over 66, however 52 % of consumers were between ages 21 and 35. The income of consumers spanned a broad range with 21.7% of consumers earning below \$25,000 per year and 19.1% of consumers earned greater than \$100,000 per year. The vast majority consumed chicken, beef, pork, fish, lamb, eggs and soy; and purchased commodity beef in a retail store and tended to not purchase grass-fed, dry-aged or organic beef.

Descriptive sensory flavor attributes and consumer sensory attributes differed across treatments. Our goal had been accomplished in that flavor differences detectable using attributes from the beef lexicon and consumers detected differences. While analysis of variance was conducted (data not presented) to determine these differences, the main objective was to understand the relationships between descriptive flavor attributes and consumer preferences. . To understand these relationships, a multivariate statistical technique, principal component analyses, was conducted (Figure 1) and strong relationships were reported (70% of the variation in this relationship was accounted for). In the biplot in Figure 1, descriptive flavor attributes (in red), consumer sensory attributes (in blue), and treatments (in green) that were closely clustered were related.

Consumer sensory attributes were closely clustered indicating that overall and flavor liking attributes were highly related to each other. In other words, beef flavor attributes were a main driver of overall liking or preference. The descriptive flavor attributes most closely clustered with the consumer liking attributes were fat-like, salt, and brown/roasted. These attributes were defined as positive drivers of beef flavor. Warmed over flavor, cardboardy, and liver-like flavors were furthest from the consumer liking attributes and would be defined as negative attributes. This indicated that for beef cuts that contained these attributes, even though samples had very low levels, consumer detected negative flavor or disliked the samples to a greater extent. Note that the negative flavor attributes were closely associated with Select CP cooked bottom round roasts cooked to either 58 or 80°C, and high pH top loin steaks and Choice top sirloin steaks cooked on the GF to 80°C.

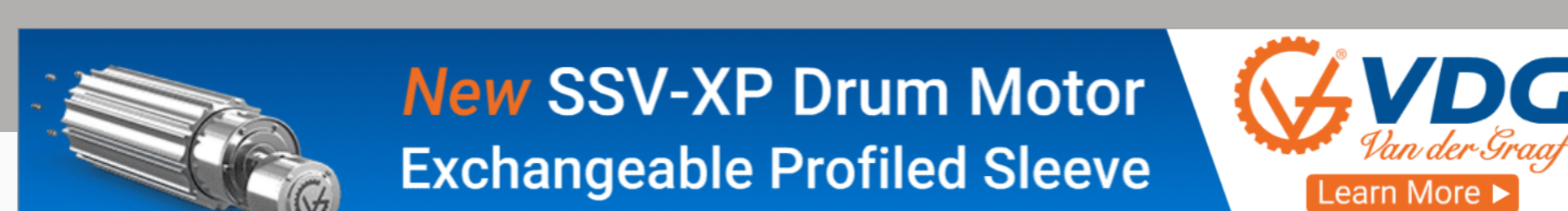
These results indicate that cooking steaks on the GF grill resulted in lower consumer sensory ratings and that this effect was intensified when steaks were cooked to higher internal cook temperatures. Consumer liking attributes were closely related to Choice top loin steaks cooked on the grill to 58°C.

Sour milk/sour dairy, sour, bloody/serummy, bitter and metallic flavors were clustered and were related to treatments cooked to lower degrees of doneness. However, some consumer did not like beef containing these attributes, but liked beef with umami, overall sweet, sweet, beef identity, and brown roasted flavors. These flavor attributes were closely associated with beef cooked to higher degrees of doneness (80°C). Top loin steaks with high pH differed in beef descriptive flavor attributes and consumer liking. When these steaks were cooked on a grill to 80°C, they were similarly liked to Choice top loin steaks cooked on a grill to 80°C.

These results showed that for heavy beefeaters, fat-like is the primary driver of consumer liking with increased levels of beef identity, brown/roasted, overall sweet, umami, salt, and sweet as secondary drivers of overall consumer liking. Most likely, consumers' preferred degree of doneness was related to liking/disliking for these secondary attributes. Warmed over flavor, cardboardy, and liver-like were negative drivers of consumer liking. Even though levels of the majority of the aforementioned flavor attributes were at lower levels on a 16-point scale, differences at low intensities impacted consumer liking.

Miller, R. K., Gray, R. A., Kerth, C. R., Adhikari, K. & Neal, J., (2023) "Descriptive Beef Flavor Attributes and Consumer Acceptance Relationships for Heavy Beef Eaters", *Meat and Muscle Biology* 7(1): 14449, 1-15. doi: <https://doi.org/10.22175/mmb.14449>

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HEIGHTENED CONSUMER AWARENESS ABOUT FOOD SAFETY PUTS MEAT AND POULTRY PROCESSORS UNDER INCREASING PRESSURE TO REVIEW PRODUCTION RISK

BY ERIC GARR

The reported rise of recalls can probably be attributed most to the food safety drive by supermarkets and club stores as well as higher food safety compliance right down the food chain. Although foreign material control is inherently process driven, if people aren't trained to understand what could go wrong and what to look for, product integrity can still be compromised.

Meat and poultry processors must always consider the whole contaminant picture – Good Manufacturing Practice, machine maintenance, design of the production facility, as well as workforce knowledge.

Metal detection is the most common technology utilized on meat and poultry processing and packing lines, mainly due to the fact that metal is the number one contaminant. However, X-ray can be used as a complementary technology providing the opportunity to detect some non-metal contaminants. Additionally, X-ray can also provide other product analysis features, for example fat content.

SOARING FARMGATE COSTS

Farmgate input costs have reached unprecedented levels. The projected price increase for animal feed and medicine, fuel and power, and fertilizers is estimated to rise by 36%, 43% and 134%, respectively. For meat and poultry processors, it can be hard to justify the loss of valuable, expensive product if contaminants could have been caught and actioned upstream.

Additionally, the current cost of living crisis has resulted in consumers now viewing meat as a luxury. As a result, meat and poultry producers are feeling even higher pressure to deliver contaminant-free products and prevent irreparable brand-damaging recalls.

Saving money vs. saving face

An inspection system can be integrated almost anywhere along a meat and poultry processing line. Most commonly, processors will choose end-of-line checkweighing and contaminant inspection technology after meat products have been prepared and packaged. Functioning as a final safeguard, at this phase there is virtually zero possibility of a new contaminant being introduced. However, if products are rejected, the costs incurred as a result of wasted food, labor and packaging can be exponentially higher.

Although metal detection offers superior sensitivity to foil contaminants, product effect common in meat products can potentially limit performance. Equally, X-ray systems can be technically challenged on high-speed processing lines.

Establishing your biggest contaminant risks and most cost-efficient CCPs and inspection solutions all help to ensure a robust HACCP-compliant food safety strategy. Delivering maximum profitability and avoiding costly waste.

FOREIGN MATTER FEARS

There are multiple sources that can introduce contaminants into meat and poultry processing lines. Foreign matter, especially metal, may be present in incoming raw meats.

The nature of foreign bodies in meat is slightly different from other food types. While imported meat may contain the usual contaminant culprits, metal, glass, plastic, wood or stone, they also contain bones. If a product is sold as "boneless", these intrinsic foreign bodies are considered undesirable and potentially dangerous.

Other processes involved with handling the produce, such as cutting, trimming, deboning, mincing or grinding, can potentially introduce contaminants. Some bones may go undetected to the naked eye and metal-to-metal contact in devices can result in metal shards. If processing equipment is not properly maintained, it also augments the risk of metal parts or flakes simply breaking off onto products.

If contaminants are undetected at the largest size, smaller pieces could end up being dispersed throughout an entire batch of beef patties or poultry nuggets. Harder and larger contaminants could also damage processing equipment, resulting in downtime, expensive repairs or even machinery replacements.

The final contaminant risk is biological pathogens. Bacteria multiplies every 20-30 minutes depending on the conditions, and prefers high-protein foods, especially in liquid form. With compliance demanding the highest levels of sanitation, it's important for meat and poultry processors to integrate hygienic, easy-to-clean inspection systems that prevent cross-contamination.

PREVENT BEFORE YOU PACK

Supplier weight checks can help to safeguard against under or overweight products. For high value produce, checkweighing verification becomes even more imperative. Bulk checkweighers can be utilized to efficiently monitor incoming stock and return rates, ensuring processors are receiving the exact weight, volume or quantity ordered. The most robust case weighers can accurately verify the weight of incoming ingredients in formats up to 110 pounds. Additionally, some processors may utilize bulk metal detectors to inspect at this initial primary processing stage, reducing the risk of potential contaminants early on and mitigating damage to down-stream processing equipment.

Prior to packaging, the raw produce may be manipulated and interact with a variety of processing equipment. Inspecting for contaminants at this stage allows for the possibility of rejected produce, once the contaminant is removed, to be reintroduced. During this stage of production, X-ray equipment can be useful to detect non-metallic foreign matter, especially in products labelled as "boneless."

For meat applications such as sausages, chicken pieces, beef patties, pâtés, meat sauces etc., a pipeline metal detector is the safest, most hygienic option. A meat pump metal detector is designed to assist in inspecting high-viscosity meats for metal contaminants as they are being pumped through a pipe, without compromising detection sensitivity.

To beat the spread of foodborne pathogens accumulating in industrial meat processing environments and avoid cross-contamination, a pipeline metal detection system should be designed with minimal places where meat residue, water ingress and bacteria can build up and potentially get embedded in pipes and crevices. Additionally, they should be able to withstand high-pressure washdowns after every product changeover.

Due to its highly conductive nature and high iron content, meat generates signals that can mistakenly be interpreted by a metal detector as a contaminant. Additionally, bubbles and voids in the product flow can trigger false rejects, leading to increased waste and needless production downtime. To overcome this product effect, a Meat Pump should address these challenges by applying powerful digital signal processing technology to clearly distinguish the signal generated by a metal contaminant from the product being inspected.

For burgers or products like meatballs, an in-line checkweigher may also be advisable. Connecting to automatic portion control machines, individual pieces that are off target weight can be removed and reworked. Programmed software can also provide corrective feedback.

END-OF-LINE SAFEGUARDS

For a GFSI-certified business with a continuous-improvement mindset, adhering to best food safety practices and ensuring products are safe for consumption is of utmost importance. Inspecting products after packaging using an end-of-line metal detection and/or X-ray system is the most important CCP. For most retailers, it is also a supplier requirement.

The most common high-risk contamination culprit in food processing remains metal. However, X-ray machines may be advisable if there are specific risks, for example potential contaminants like bone that won't be detected using a metal detector. Both X-ray and metal detection systems offer distinct advantages. A manufacturer always needs to factor in their biggest contaminant risks. It's equally critical to understand that each type of meat – minced, large joints, cooked, frozen, etc. – have varying product effects and can therefore behave differently in a metal detector.

To comply with global weights and measures FSU directly to QA and technical personnel is increasingly imperative on fast-moving meat and poultry processing lines.

For traceability and audit purposes, records must be retained in order to verify that each system is performing to defined FDA and GFSI food safety standards and to prove that inspection procedures are being followed consistently and correctly. Switching to digital record-keeping is generally favored as they are more secure, less prone to human errors and tests cannot be performed retrospectively. Additionally, it gives meat processors immediate access to documentation in the event of an unannounced supplier or third-party inspection.

Automatic testing is also advisable. These are available for use on pipeline and conveyor metal detectors to eliminate human errors, reduce labor demands and save time and money. One of the key benefits of automatic testing is food safety and QC standards are maintained, in many cases improved upon, without compromising production. The results from tests are automatically logged and digitally stored for GFSI audits.

STAY STRATEGIC

HACCP guidance states that critical control points (CCPs) should be located at any step where hazards can be prevented, eliminated, or reduced to acceptable levels. Every food processor's needs are different. The same applies to products.

Rather than looking for patterns, examine potential CCP-holes. This is even more critical if a production process or packaging is changing. An annual HACCP assessment – a requirement for most meat and poultry facilities - will help to ensure all essential inspection points are covered and, most importantly, retail and foodservice compliant.

Eric Garr is regional sales manager at Fortress Technology.

Image credits: Fortress Technology

Photo 1: In-line pipeline metal detectors are one of the most efficient methods for inspecting meat products and removing contaminants before the packing process

Photo 2: Inspecting products after packaging using an end-of-line metal detection and/or X-ray system is imperative to ensuring full food safety compliance.

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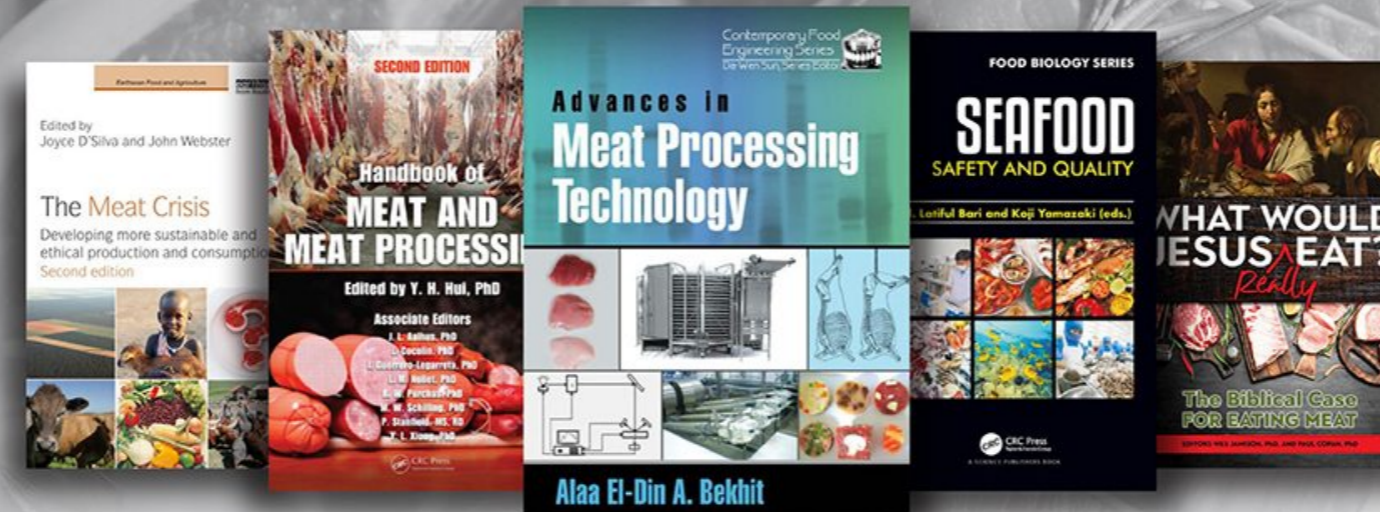
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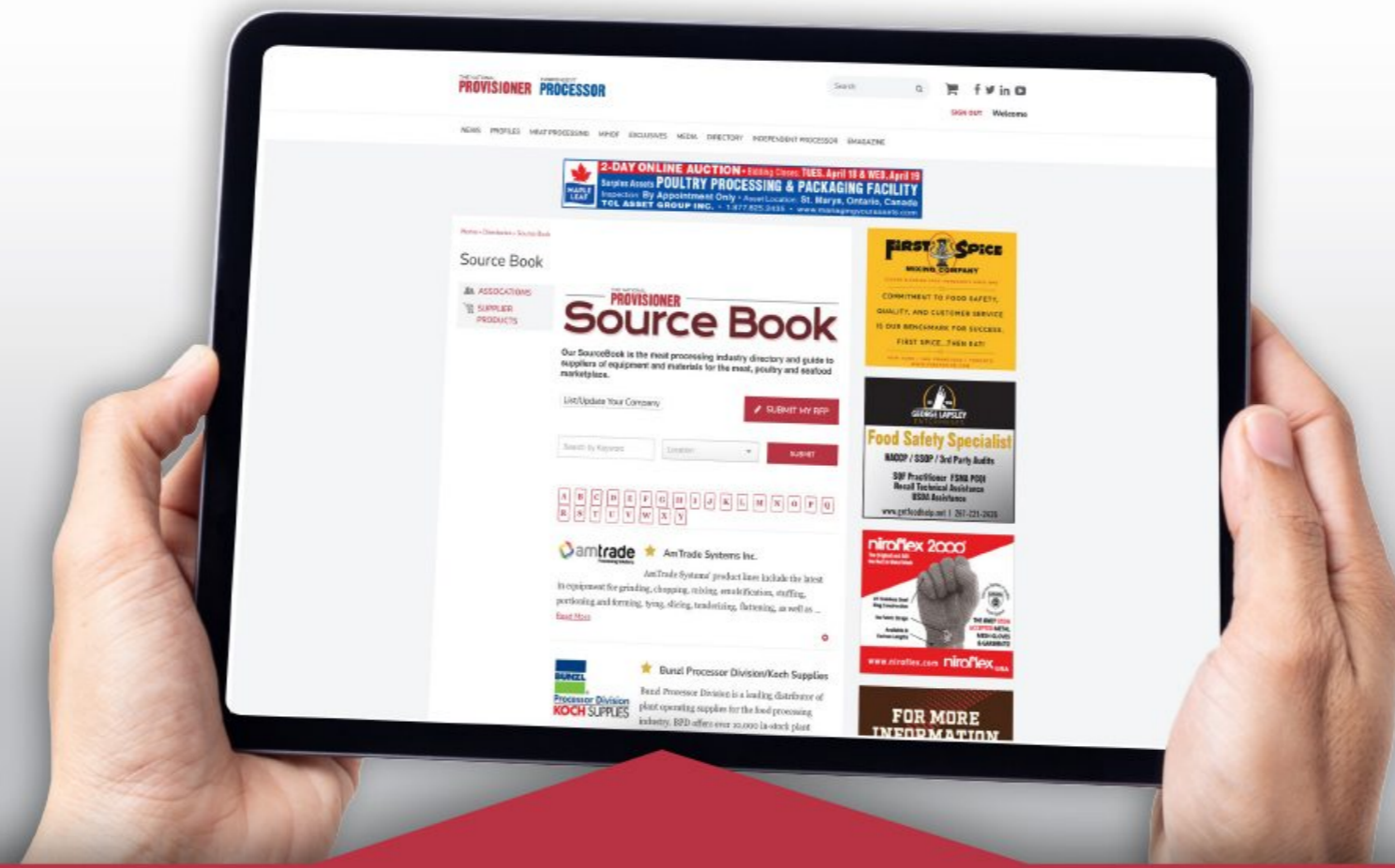
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CUSTOM PROCESSING FOCUS EXPANDS

ENHANCED OPERATIONAL AGILITY FUELS CO-PACKING AND PRIVATE-LABEL PROJECTS. BY FRED WILKINSON
CHIEF EDITOR

Zimmerman Quality Meats is a local meat processor, providing its community with conventional retail meats as well as slaughter and processing services, with the ability to process products from harvest all the way to shelf-ready cooked product under one roof.

Founded in 2003, the Summersville, Mo.-based processor's foundational customer base consisted of local farmers and hunters seeking services for their own households. The operation now slaughters multiple species under USDA-FSIS inspection, with its current leadership having been in place for eight years, said Jon Cartwright, owner of Zimmerman Quality Meats.

The company employs around 45 workers, including its full-time and seasonal production and retail staff.

Zimmerman Quality Meats raises some animals for harvesting at their on-site facility while also contracting with other local producers, Cartwright said.

"We have some customers whose products are more commodity driven, so they're interested in buying bulk from a big packer, and then we have some that are willing to pay a slight premium to get that local source verified," Cartwright said.

"Custom processing is at the core of Zimmerman Meats' business," said Isaac Keene, general manager of Zimmerman Quality Meats. "We process products under six different HACCP programs, and we package for numerous custom and private labels."

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PLANT EXPANSION FUELS GROWTH

Keene said Zimmerman Quality Meats is in the process of expanding its further processing capacity, including a recent addition that grew the operation to nearly 19,000 square feet and brought equipment upgrades as well.

Zimmerman Quality Meats produces a wide range of fresh meat products including grinds, Cartwright said, for sale at its retail locations in southern Missouri as well as in collaboration with co-packing partners.

Keene said co-packing and private-label projects are playing an increasing role in Zimmerman Quality Meats' business, due in part to their enhanced operational agility.

"We have developed a processing team and facility that is unique among its peers in the agility of its operations," Keene said. "We can spin up capacity in any of our production lines on relatively short notice. This makes us an appealing partner for customers who have already launched a product or brand, seeking a partner to augment or economize their existing production."

He said that while custom processing and local family farms will remain an important part of the operation, the company sees the best potential for growth – bringing jobs and revenue into the community – in private-label and co-packing opportunities.

"We do a pulled pork product. We smoke pork butts, and then we pull them out. We sell that under our label at our stores, and we also sell that as a co-packed product through our customers," Cartwright said.

Zimmerman Quality Meats boasts a wide range of meat products, including fully cooked shelf-stable items such as summer sausage, snack sticks and snack strips, and beef jerky, which it co-packs for private-label in 2- and 5-pound bulk packages. Keene said.

Zimmerman Quality Meats also markets and co-packs fully cooked cured, smoked pork chops, which rank among their most in-demand items, Cartwright said.

THREE RETAIL STORES

The company's retail product lineup includes raw, heat-treated, and ready-to-eat products, products which Zimmerman Quality Meats sells at its three retail stores in southern Missouri.

"We have three retail stores in a 100-mile radius, all in communities of less than 10,000 people," Keene said. "Our primary day-to-day competition is the nearest chain retailer or big box store, and its commodity-priced pound of hamburger, sausage, or lunchmeat. In these larger retail and warehouse stores, self-check registers and remote shopping have virtually eliminated personal interactions and relationships between customers and their grocer. In fact, the retail customer has been commoditized as much, if not more, than the retail product."

That's where Zimmerman Meats' retail business creates a simple but unique value proposition, he said.

"We offer a clean and modest store, attended by friendly staff, stocked with a basic array of quality meat products at a price point that is within reach for the day-to-day budget of a mainstream family," Keene said.

"The sooner we can redirect a customer from the website toward a connection with a real person, the better our team will be able to serve them," he said. "To this end, we've actually removed most retail product listings from our website over the past year."

PREMIUM PET FOOD GROWTH

Another area where Zimmerman Quality Meats is finding increasing demand is for premium-branded pet foods, Keene said.

Keene said one of Zimmerman's biggest co-packing opportunities in the past year or so has been a ready-to-eat human grade meat product branded for pets.

Zimmerman Quality Meats recently moved to dual USDA/FDA jurisdiction to produce human-grade pet treats for a co-packing customer with national distribution.

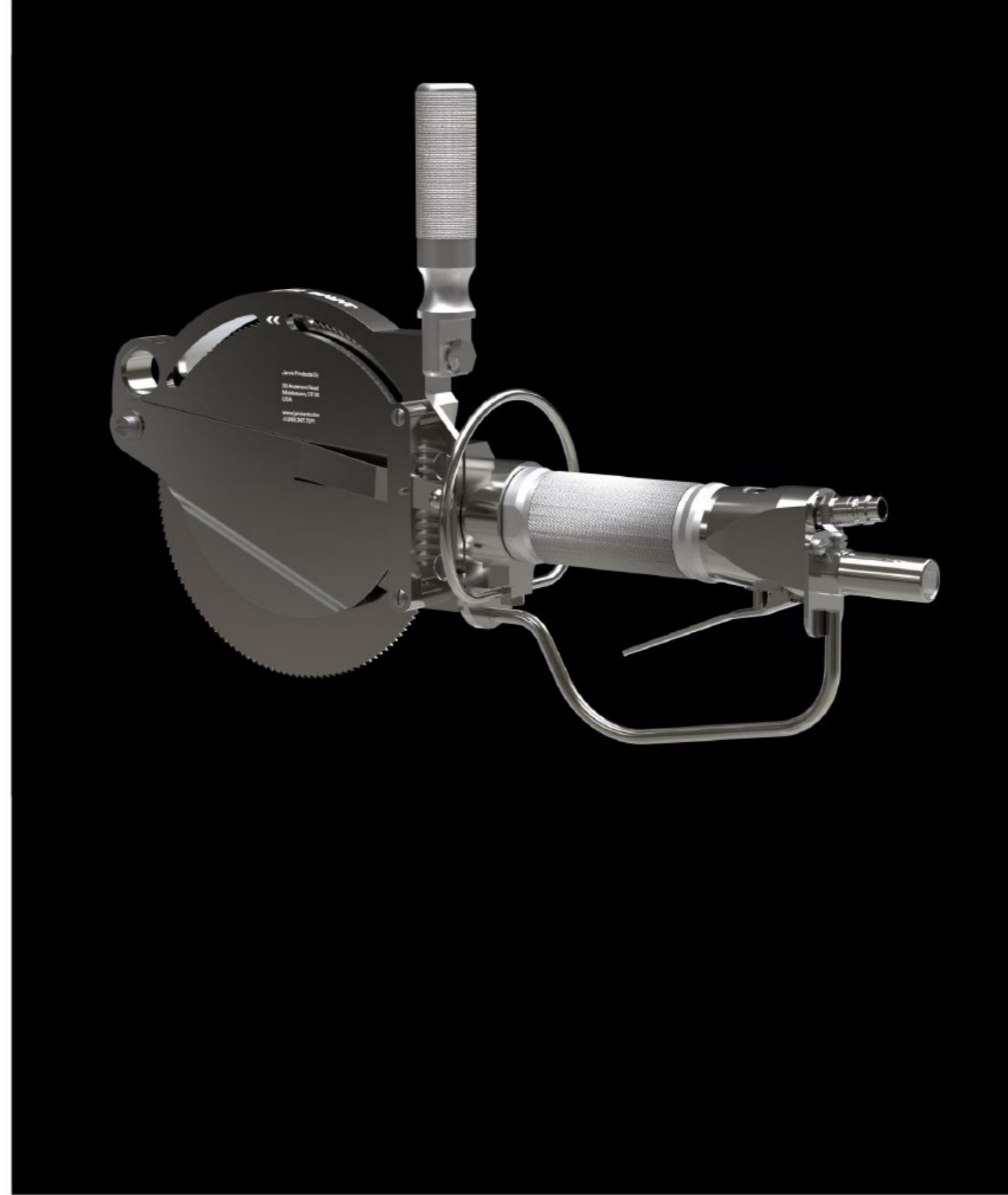
"What we're seeing is a lot of people who want us to mimic the food we're making for human consumption also for pet consumption," he said.

Images credit: ZIMMERMAN QUALITY MEATS

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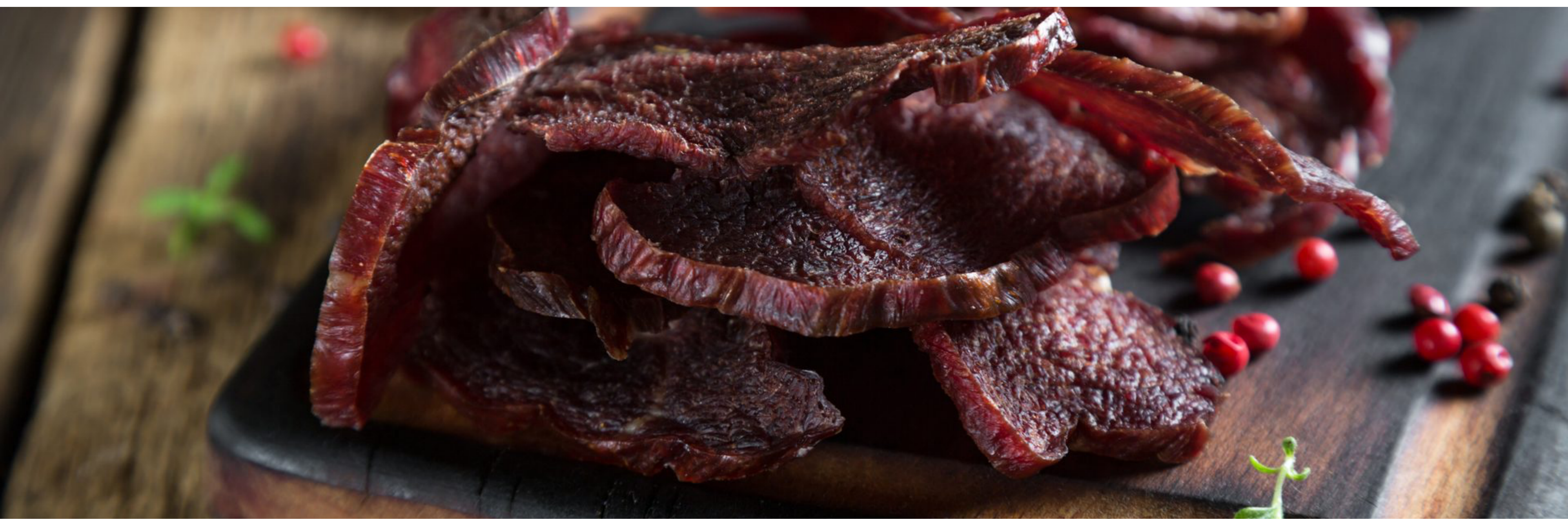
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CONVENIENCE, TRANSPARENCY, NUTRITIONAL VALUE DRIVE STRONG JERKY PERFORMANCE

OF THE MEAT SNACK OFFERINGS ON THE MARKET, JERKY IS KING. BY SAMMY BREDAR
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Consumers are looking for convenient on-the-go protein options, and meat snacks cater directly to that demand. Of the meat snack offerings on the market, jerky is king.

During The Power of Meat presentation at the 2024 Annual Meat Conference, 210 Analytics principal Anne-Marie Roerink emphasized consumer demand for healthy products, convenience and transparency. Jerky fulfills all of these consumer demands, explaining jerky's strong performance.

Trends in the meat snack category, particularly for jerky, have contributed to the success of jerky. According to [The Brainy Insights](#), "Jerky has dominated the market thereby acquiring a market share of 35% in the year 2023."

Consumers are looking for snack offerings high in protein, and jerky can deliver. Many jerky brands are also working to reduce sugar and preservatives in their products, further catering to consumer demand for healthier offerings. Oregon-based Old Trapper, known for their beef jerky, noted that consumers want their protein offerings to have higher nutritional value. "Consumers are consistently looking for high quality, healthy, and delicious snacks and beef jerky is a natural fit for this," said Robert Leary, chief marketing officer of Old Trapper.



Health-focused protein consumption is actually driving growth for the jerky category, according to [The Brainy Insights](#).

The 2024 Power of Meat presentation noted consumer concern over ultra-processed foods. By decreasing use of preservatives and having more natural products, the jerky industry can give consumers what they want out of their meat snacking products.

Consumer perception can drive meat snack growth. Balchem's Marketing Manager Shannon Fitzgerald said, "Some ... consider meat snacks to be less processed than other protein sources such as protein powders and bars." Since consumers value both high protein content and more natural products, jerky is well positioned for success.

Old Trapper noted that consumers truly value transparency with their protein products. The family-owned company utilizes its packaging to give consumers transparent products—literally. By using its signature clear packaging, Old Trapper lets consumers know exactly what they are getting with their meat snacks.

Old Trapper finds that transparency is the most effective marketing strategy for jerky—consumers need to know they are getting a high-value product. "No gimmicks or schemes. This is a key part of our messaging - that our jerky and sticks include high quality beef and ingredients, and we are transparent on exactly what is inside each bag," Leary said.

According to Research And Markets, jerky is expected to dominate the global meat snacks market due to its convenience and long shelf life. As consumer demand for convenience grows, jerky is well-positioned.

"Moreover, the numerous flavors and textures jerky gives cater to diverse tastes, further solidifying their reputation," according to Research And Markets. As Balchem's Fitzgerald noted, consumers are liking familiar flavors in their jerky products.

"However, there is an opportunity to introduce unique and exciting twists or combinations to traditional flavors," Fitzgerald said.

She cited Mintel's Flavourscape AI predications for meat snacks, which predict high growth potential for hot, sour and citrus meat snack flavors; flavors with strong potential include chorizo, hot, barbecue/barbacoa, smoke, pickle, sausage, salt and vinegar, orange, lemon and pineapple. Fitzgerald said these flavors showcase the flavor of the meat. Though tried-and-true jerky flavors are seeing success, there is always room for experimentation and exploration with new flavors.

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YOU CAN STILL GRILL IN AMERICA

WHETHER IN THEIR OWN BACKYARD OR ON THE RESTAURANT PATIO, CONSUMERS MAKE GRILLED MEATS A SUMMERTIME MEALTIME GO-TO.

BY FRED WILKINSON
CHIEF EDITOR

According to The Power of Meat 2024 [survey](#), 91% of consumers can be persuaded to spend a little more on meat and poultry for holidays, special occasions and entertaining.

The all-American summertime tradition of backyard cookouts, firing up the Weber to grill family dinner, and all manner of at-home and dining-out meal occasions from Memorial Day to July Fourth Labor Day to aligns perfectly with summer grilling season opportunities to align meat and poultry products with good times and treasured memories.

The burger holds an iconic place in America's list a grilling favorites.

Brett Erickson, director of prepared and packaged solutions for Certified Angus Beef, said rising beef costs have failed to cool consumer demand for [burgers](#), adding that he expects burger demand to take off as the weather gets warmer and grilling season heats up.

Making mealtime a pastime rather than a chore presents a great way to deepen consumers' connection with grilled meats.

The National Turkey Federation is again partnering with the Kansas City Barbeque Society to kick off the fifth year of the Turkey Smoke Series. That effort aims to encourage both recreational and professional pitmasters to showcase their grilling skills with [turkey](#) on the [smoker or grill](#). The Turkey Smoke Series features a turkey category in select competitive barbeque events across the US in 2024.



SEASONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRILLING AT FOODSERVICE

In addition to being America's summertime backyard entertaining all-stars, grilled meats offer creative avenues for seasonal menu innovation as well.

"The summer grilling season gives our foodservice providers an opportunity to showcase fresh, locally sourced ingredients while adding variety and seasonal appeal to their menus," said Kevin Lindgren, director of merchandising at New York-based Baldor Specialty Foods. "Many report they will be incorporating local fruits, vegetables, and herbs into their grilled dishes, marketing them as peak season, limited time only, chalkboard specials."

Lindgren said that while traditional steak and burgers are maintaining their popularity, there's an uptick in demand for more cost-effective protein options, with foodservice operators asking for more cost-effective center of the plate options like sirloin flap, skirts hanger and flat irons.

"Value-added proteins, such as pre-marinated or pre-portioned items, are helping ease the burden some restaurants face with labor challenges," Lindgren said. "Portioning and marinating meats in advance reduces the need for extensive prep work in the kitchen, saving valuable time during peak service hours and stabilizing costs per portion"

The unique sensory value proposition they offer consumers continues to make grilled meats a sought after eating experience despite that fact that consumer are still feeling the pinch of higher food prices.

"Grilling's great because it enhances the natural flavors and textures of meats, creating a satisfying dining experience that creates an elevated perceived value, even in the face of rising food costs," Lindgren said. "The most cost-effective center of the plate options are thin meats best prepared on the grill like sirloin flap, skirts hanger and flat irons. Pairing grilled proteins with a wide range of side dishes and accompaniments, offers consumers customizable meal options that can suit their preferences and their budgets."

Another trend Lindgren said Baldor is seeing a growing interest in sustainable and ethically raised meats, leading to the featuring of grass-fed beef, organic chicken, and responsibly sourced seafood on menus.

Images credit: Baldor Specialty Foods

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LEGISLATORS AND REGULATORS WEIGH LABELING REGULATIONS ADDRESSING COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AND MEAT ANALOGS. BY LACY BATES

Last summer, I published an article outlining eight acts before Congress that every meat processor should be aware of. You can read the article [here](#). All of the acts listed are still before Congress. Now, whether they excel is to be determined. Two of the eight acts are centered around truth in labeling. So, what progress has been made regarding labeling?

HR 1604 USA BEEF ACT AND FSIS PRODUCT OF USA CLAIMS

H.R. 1604 USA Beef Act was introduced in the House of Representatives on March 2023. The bill would prohibit the label of beef or beef food products from bearing the phrase “Product of USA” unless such beef is exclusively derived from one or more cattle born, raised, and slaughtered in the United States. Today, HR 1604 is still before the House Committee on Agriculture.

In March 2023, the US Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety Inspection Service [finalized the rule](#) Voluntary Labeling of FSIS – Regulated Products with U.S. Origin Claims.

Under the FSIS rule, single-ingredient products that are eligible for the “Product of USA” claim must be derived from animals born, raised, slaughtered and processed in the United States. Multi-ingredient products include all FSIS-regulated components derived from animals born, raised and slaughtered in the U.S. and all additional ingredients, except spices and flavorings, are of domestic origin. Again, this is a voluntary claim for all FSIS inspected products, whereas the USA Beef Act if passed would make the claim mandatory on beef and beef products.

H.R. 7130 & S. 3693 FAIR Labels Act of 2024

Sponsored by US Rep. Mark Alford, R-Mo., and Sen. Roger Marshall, R-Kan.

The FAIR Labels Act was introduced in January 2024. Its purpose is to amend the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act to ensure that consumers can make informed decisions in choosing between meat and poultry products and imitation meat and imitation poultry products, and for other purposes.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN REGARDING LABELING?

Manufacturers of products not derived from beef, pork, poultry or catfish that was harvested in a USDA facility would need to include the terms ‘imitation’, ‘cell-cultured’, or ‘lab-grown’. Therefore, all cell-cultured and plant-based products are under scrutiny.

WHAT TERMS SHOULD BE USED ON CERTAIN PRODUCTS?

The term ‘imitation’ meat and poultry products would refer to food products manufactured to look like meat and poultry products but which are derived from non-meat and poultry substitutes, such as plants. All cell-cultured meat and poultry products would be required to include the terms “cell-cultured” or “lab-grown” prominently on the label.

IF PASSED, WHAT AGENCY WOULD REGULATE THE FOOD LABELS?

According to the FAIR Labels Act, the USDA would become the sole arbitrator of the label pre-approval process like with any other meat and poultry product label. The Federal Meat Inspection Act and Poultry Products Inspection Act require meat and poultry products to receive pre-approval from the USDA on labels prior to the product entering commerce. However, the FDA does not have a pre-approval label process for products. Therefore, under the FAIR Labels Act manufacturers of “imitation,” “cell-cultured” or “lab-grown” products would need to account for additional process of submitting labels to the USDA for pre-approval. Currently, FDA and FSIS have joint jurisdiction for cell-cultured products. FSIS is currently developing a proposed rule on the labeling requirements for cell-cultured products and will ensure that labels are not false, misleading or misbranded to the consumer.

HOW WOULD THIS AFFECT THE STATES WHO HAVE PASSED SIMILAR LEGISLATION?

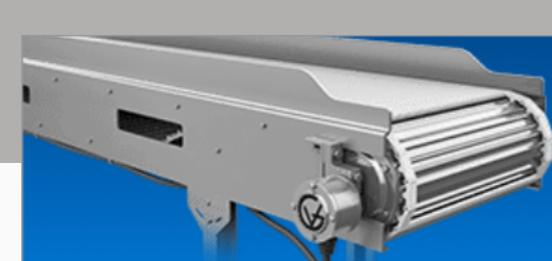
Numerous states in the United States have developed independent alternative meat labeling legislations. These states include Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Wyoming and most recently Iowa. While each of these states have differing legislation, all agree that there should be additional labeling requirements on alternative meat products. Although the FAIR Labels Act does not address these individual state legislations, when a state law interferes or conflicts with a federal law, the state law is overruled by the federal law. As a result, the FAIR Labels Act would be enforced over the state law.

ADDITIONAL LEGISLATION?

There is a sister bill also before Congress, S. 3281 Real MEAT (Marketing Edible Artificials Truthfully) Act of 2023, sponsored by Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Mo. The Real MEAT Acts would amend the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act to ensure that consumers can make informed decisions in choosing between meat products such as beef and imitation meat products, and for other products.

Southwest Meat Association will continue to monitor legislative actions and assist meat and poultry processors in any way necessary.

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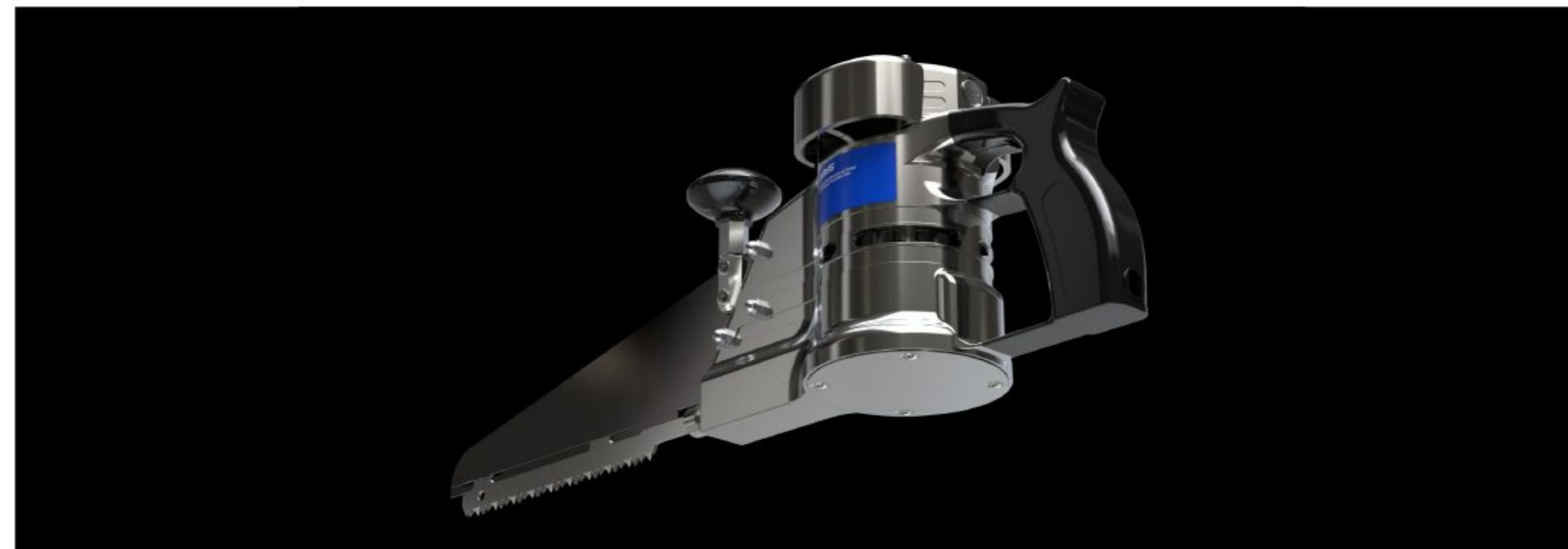
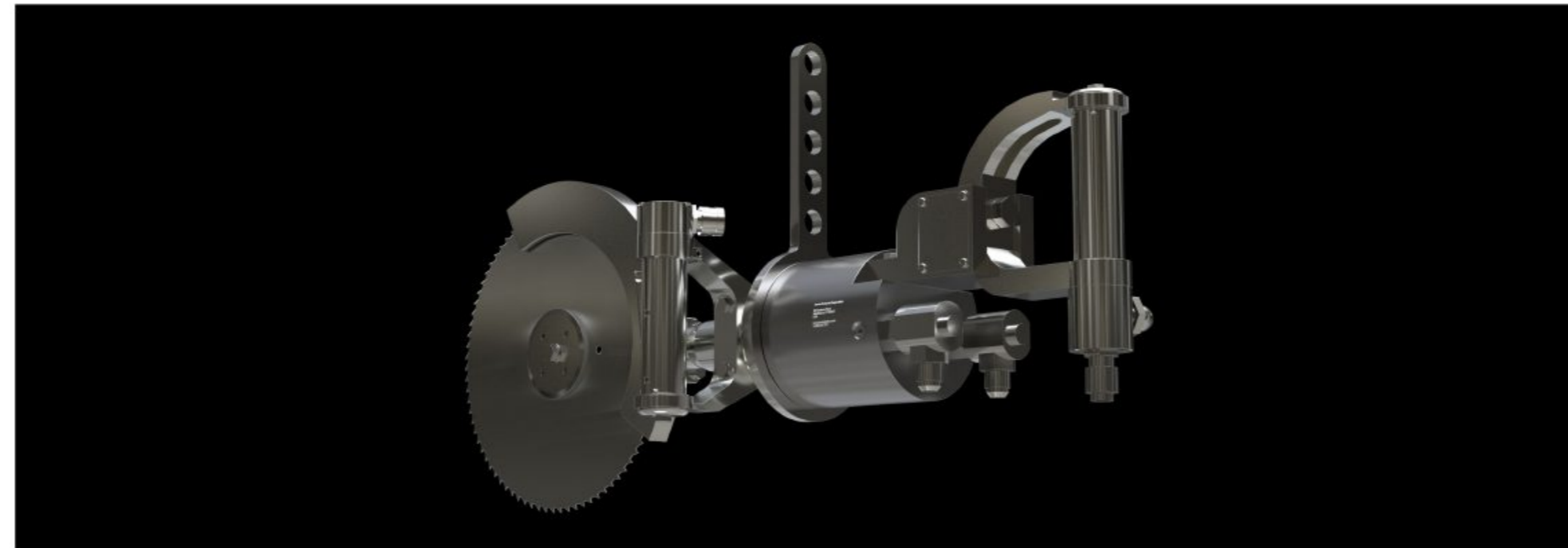
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THE NMSU LAS CRUCES CAMPUS IS UNIQUE IN THAT ITS NEARLY 164-ACRE AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT SITS ADJACENT TO THE CAMPUS CORE. BY DR. SHANNA IVEY

Above: Dr. Francine Mezzomo Giotto, Jacob Painter and Craig Painter.

In June 2021, New Mexico State University (NMSU) celebrated the groundbreaking for its Agricultural Modernization Educational Facilities project, following the approval of \$43 million green-lit by voters in two phases through the 2018 and 2020 General Obligation Bond (GO Bond) elections. The project was part of a long-term facilities master plan for all NMSU's campuses and sites statewide that aimed to repurpose or replace older buildings with structures that meet the current and future needs of the university's land-grant mission.

On Nov. 3, 2023, the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences (ACES) hosted the ribbon cutting ceremony to open the doors of the Food Science, Security, and Safety Center, one of three buildings completed so far with the GO Bond funds. The building houses a meat science laboratory; a lecture hall with the capacity to seat 65 named after the late L. Neil Burcham, a professor for the College of ACES for nearly half a century; a retail store; a food science laboratory; one food chemistry/quality assurance/quality control laboratory; and a value-added foods laboratory (serving as a pilot plant for product development).

The new facility will strengthen the capabilities of the College of ACES to serve the needs of the state and the border region through teaching, research, extension, and outreach activities while also serving customers' needs through custom slaughter and fabrication services. The facility will employ undergraduate students and aims to expand the portfolio of NMSU brand products with the offering of beef, pork, and lamb. Additionally, the facility will support 4-H and FFA projects.



Food Science, Security, and Safety Center.

Pistol Pete's Premium Meats retail store.

On top of the new facility, NMSU also hired three new faculty and staff members to coordinate meat science and judging activities serving the institution's needs for the Animal Science (ANSC) and Food Science and Technology (FSTE) degree programs. The hires included Jacob Painter, serving as the meat lab manager and head coach of the meat judging team; Craig Painter, as the livestock judging coach and instructor, and Dr. Francine Mezzomo Giotto, as the Assistant Professor of Meat Science.

For the first time since the retirement of Dr. Jack Thomas, who taught meat science prior to his retirement in 2015, students from the ANSC and FSTE degree programs can enroll in classes such as Introduction to Meat Science; Meat and Muscle Biology; and Processed Meats. These new courses offered at NMSU expose students to hands-on learning opportunities, industry speakers, internships, facilities tours, and events hosted by the American Meat Science Association (AMSA).

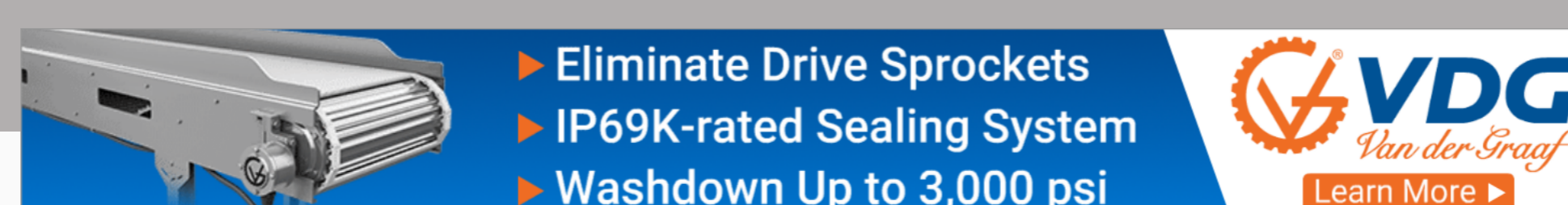
NMSU Meat Science team also provides support to the needs of the industry. In this past year, Jacob Painter helped Stampede Meat to bolster their current Butcher Certification program by adding an on the floor training portion. The Stampede Butcher Certification was previously held as an in-classroom "theory" course only. As stated by Kelsey Eklin, Stampede strategic project and office manager "the support from Jacob has been a tremendous help to us to certify our trainers for the on-the-floor training at Stampede. His hard work has helped make the relaunch of our program a huge success."

The meat science program at NMSU also features a newly formed meat judging team. The team is poised and ready to cross the country to attend competitions, promote student development, networking, and build workforce capacity with the meat industry. In addition to the financial support received from the AMSA through the Judging Jump Start fund, the team will also organize barbecue catering services as a fundraiser to support team travel to national contests.

The NMSU Las Cruces campus is unique among American collegiate campuses in that its agricultural district, which is approximately 164 acres in size, is adjacent to the campus core. NMSU has all the physical and human resources to educate the future generation of industry leaders. For more information about NMSU Animal Science, visit ansr.nmsu.edu. For NMSU Food Science & Technology, visit <https://fcs.nmsu.edu/>. Specific questions about meat science can be directed to Dr. Francine Mezzomo Giotto, fgiotto@nmsu.edu, 575-646-2492 or Jacob Painter, jacobpa@nmsu.edu.

Dr. Shanna Ivey is the department head for the Department of Animal and Range Sciences at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.

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