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IMPROVED PORK PRODUCTS FOR THE 1990's

D. H. Kropf

The word "improved" in a commercial sense means "altered product characteristics to meet the consumers' real and perceived needs." The pork industry in the 90's must progress toward offering products designed to meet consumer demands instead of saying "this is what we are producing and you'd better buy it." For the pork producer, "improved" means those products that will increase pork sales.

We must realize that the primary nutritional contributions of pork to human diets will be protein and vitamins, especially B-vitamins. Perhaps we should emphasize these more in our advertising, but good flavor, low fat, low salt, and convenience are likely the selling points to be emphasized. Perhaps we also can stress the desirability of other features of new pork products developed in the 90's, such as added dietary fiber or the advantage of pork fat in having a more desirable ratio of polyunsaturated/monounsaturated fatty acids in relation to saturated fatty acids than other animal fats and some plant fats.

The population of U.S. consumers in the 90's is likely to include an even higher percentage of health conscious people "on the go," with very little time to prepare traditional meals. A higher proportion will depend on the "deli" or fast food restaurant to prepare their meals. Pork must find more channels into these sources of supply.

Ham and similar cured meats (not bacon) appear to offer a number of possibilities that meet the "needs" of customers, with 94 to 97% fat-free items and reduced salt products. Perhaps these products could use more built-in convenience and more single-serving packs. The greater and greater amounts of added water also are a concern to many of us.

Currently, the most serious product price problem is the low price for pork bellies. This likely reflects an increasing number of consumers who will not accept the fatness and excessive cooking loss of much bacon. This problem has been accentuated by processors "robbing bellies" of lean to channel the lean into trimmings with higher value than bellies. Our hope to recapture the breakfast bacon market is to offer such products as "center cuts." Use of porcine somatotropin has reduced belly fatness and increased thickness of belly muscling in some studies. This offers some promise that we can improve the raw material for bacon. Restructured bacon-like products such as breakfast strips also offer promise of holding our "bacon" market, but the raw material for these leaner products seldom comes from the belly. An increasing niche for bacon has been in a variety of sandwiches, such as "bacon and cheddar" or "bacon and beef," which contribute the highly desirable bacon flavor.

Another pork product with a declining image because of its high fat content is pork sausage, which too often is a way to "unload" less desirable, high-fat pork trim. A number of

pork sausage products are precooked and, with a leaner composition, could recapture the "pork sausage market."

An important outlet for pork should be in products offered in the fast-growing deli business. One reason why so few of the deli items are pork is its propensity to develop "warmed over flavor" when reheated. The same problem has affected such fast food products as the "boneless ribs." Use of nitrite, as in cured products, overcomes this problem. Other ingredients also offer promise.

Another problem we need to address is the occurrence of fresh pork chops that are unacceptably tough. Meat market managers tell us about this problem, which may be accentuated by rapid or ultra chill techniques, and Illinois researchers found 17 to 22% of pork loins to be unacceptably tough. We must reduce the incidence, whether by breeding, modifying chill procedures, or by an improved tenderness product such as Wilson Tender Cuts.

An important criterion for such improved pork products as leaner bacon is improved raw material, i.e., leaner carcasses, leaner bellies, etc. I must admit there has not been a sufficient monetary incentive for a pork breeder or feeder to produce those leaner carcasses, perhaps at the expense of some production efficiencies. In fact, some live hog or carcass pricing systems discourage production of leaner carcasses.

Our European colleagues are quick to point out how fat our bacon and other products are, compared to theirs. I do not want U.S. producers to experience the stress susceptibility and pork color and firmness problems experienced in some European countries. BUT, I firmly believe we need to use a VALUE-BASED pricing system, if we want to improve pork in the 90's.

(Key Words: Pork Products, Bellies, Sausage, Deli, Carcass Leanness.)



Student workers cutting pork in the new KSU meats facility.