

BIG, BAM Boost Beef Demand

Checkoff-funded program finds alternatives to thin steaks from larger carcasses.

by **WYATT BECHTEL,**

CAB industry information intern

A dry, flavorless and thinly cut steak can be enough to sour anyone's taste for beef.

"There is no doubt that cattle are getting bigger, and that will continue," says Terry Houser, Kansas State University (K-State) meat scientist. "I don't think we are going to produce smaller-ribeyed cattle any time soon or start selecting cattle for that trait."

Still, demand for beef looks bright, thanks to new cutting methods developed to tackle the issue of increasing carcass size and its effect on the eating experience.

Some of these methods have been brought to market by the Beef Checkoff's Retail Marketing Team and its Beef Alternative Merchandising (BAM) program.

BAM came about through "listening to what consumers want," says Trevor Amen, channel marketing manager for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), contractor for the Beef Checkoff. "Through the years, the Retail Marketing Team's cutting tests and focus groups put the product in front of consumers to really see how they interact and what their purchase interest would be."

According to Kari Underly, author of "The Art of Beef Cutting," who worked with the team, consumers appreciate cooking tips and detailed recipes. They also prefer smaller cuts with less trim. "The right-size portion for many of them seems to be a 4-ounce (oz.) portion," she says.

That might seem discouraging, considering the impetus was how to deal with larger carcass size, but it actually opens more doors in beef marketing, Underly says.

In research, new cuts were taken from the ribeye, strip and top butt of typical 700- to 800-pound (lb.) carcasses as well as those pushing the limits at 1,000-1,100 lb.

"We wanted to make sure BAM would work well financially on both sizes," Underly explains. It did, and served to create a wider range of choices for consumers. "It's an add-on to what retailers were already featuring."

A top cut

The research dovetailed with efforts of the beef checkoff-funded Beef Innovations Group (BIG). Prior to the concept of alternative cutting techniques, retailers had trouble marketing quality cuts from the top butt; now the trouble is simply keeping enough of it in the meatcase.

"The top sirloin butt has certainly been a victory for us," says Mark Gwin, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) research and development manager.

Also a member of BIG, Gwin says retail and consumer buy-in has been strongest for the alternative offerings from this wholesale cut, among all the middle meats.

Three retail cuts were developed through BIG: baseball steaks, culotte steaks and the filet of sirloin. "Any trimmed pieces can be used as medallions or fajita meat," Gwin adds.

Top sirloins used to be cut exclusively into large steaks with no focus on the

multiple muscle complexes within, creating tougher areas within the cut when cooked, he says. The new cuts are thicker and pinpoint where the muscle grain changes.

"We are giving people the means to cut these muscles into thicker steaks to give them a more succulent experience," Gwin says.

Revise the ribeye

"With the ribeye, we're removing that cap muscle, the *spinalis dorsi*," says Mark Polzer, CAB vice president of business development. "That lets you deal with a much smaller diameter product and you can cut it easier."

The reduction provides advantages on the plate. It will allow restaurants to market ribeyes at 8-10 oz. rather than 12 oz. and will bring the thickness back to a range of 1-1.5 inches, he says.

Previous industry trends were to maintain the entire ribeye with the cap muscle intact. But that made for an increasingly larger surface area, and half the thickness of the new cuts.

"We've cut ribeye steaks from the center eye muscle to increase the thickness of the steak. That provides a higher-quality eating experience with more tenderness, juiciness and flavor," Polzer says.

In cooking, a thin steak has less water retention capability than the thick cut, Houser says.

"A thicker steak will retain juiciness better and it won't be overcooked as easily," he notes. "Obviously, the product quality is going to be better than on a thin-cut item."

Splitting the strip

Strip steaks got an overhaul, too, but it was a simple solution.

"All we do is take the strip loin and literally cut it lengthwise in half," Polzer says. "What you end up with would be two filet-size pieces that then are cut into filet of strip loins."

Much like the reduced ribeye, the strip loin filet makes for smaller portion size while gaining thickness. Popular *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand options include medallions from the chateau for two and the split strip.

Polzer says many of the filet cuts are already being created before they reach retail, so they can be given a more attractive cylinder shape by tying or netting.

At first, consumers wondered how to cook the small-but-thick cuts, Underly says: "A lot of them tended to burn the outside, and the inside was not cooked properly, either." NCBA and the Beef Checkoff found an answer by helping retailers teach consumers a skillet-to-oven process.

"You brown the filets on the outside and then stick the pan into the oven where they can finish nice and slow for the right doneness," she says. "We also created some grill methods such as for the petite roast."

Consumer preference

Despite a few years in a tough economy, beef purchasing has remained steady.

"We know Americans love to eat beef and they are finding ways to continue to eat beef," Amen says.

The new cuts do their part to help keep costs down. They can be marketed in smaller package sizes, so more consumers can buy beef.

Partly because the new cuts avoid some seam fat, several have been endorsed with the American Heart Association's heart-check mark. "That's basically communicating to consumers that eating beef can be healthy for you," Amen says.

While the BIG and BAM approaches are helping boost beef consumption by marketing new cuts, "demand response will drive how we further innovate the program," he adds. "We'll keep working to meet the needs of consumers by providing options and high-quality beef products."

More information on BAM is available at www.beefretail.org/beefalternativemerchandising.aspx; for BIG details, visit www.beefinnovationsgroup.com; and the CAB consumer website is at www.certifiedangusbeef.com.

Below: The efforts of the Beef Alternative Merchandising (BAM) program dovetailed with similar efforts by the Beef Innovations Group (BIG) to introduce to retailers and consumers alternate cuts from the top sirloin butt, the ribeye and strip steak. The new cuts are smaller and thicker, making for a juicier, more tender and flavorful eating experience.



Chimichurri-Marinated
Top Loin Filets



Grilled Top Sirloin Filets with
Smoky Orange Sauce



Lemon-Pepper Seasoned Ribeye Filets
with Roasted Tomatoes

PHOTOS COURTESY BEEF CHECKOFF