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Beef Science Cluster

Canada's 2009 Beef Consumer Satisfaction Survey

Project Title:

National Beef Quality Satisfaction Survey and Carcass Audit

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Project Leaders:

Analytical and laboratory work conducted by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada researchers (led by Jennifer Aalhus and Manuel Juárez), retail sampling and consumer testing conducted by Actionable Market Research (Cheryl Clark, Daniel Clark, Rolline Pare and Frank Morgan), and coordinated by the Canadian Cattlemen's Association (Mark Klassen).

Background:

A 1995 survey found that one quarter of Canada's retail steaks were too tough. This prompted retailers to implement standardized ageing protocols. In 2001, a survey assessed demographics, steak preparation and cooking methods, and eating satisfaction among Canadian beef consumers. Follow-up studies to determine whether industry had successfully improved consumer satisfaction were planned for 2006, but these plans were derailed by BSE.

Objective:

To identify how the eating quality of Canadian beef has changed since 2001.

What they did:

Over 1,100 consumers were surveyed in Montreal, Toronto, London and Calgary. These consumers were provided a top sirloin, strip loin, inside round or boneless cross rib steak to take home and cook. Follow-up interviews recorded how they prepared the beef, as well as their impressions of tenderness, flavor and juiciness.

What they learned:

Consumer demographics: More men (34%) were surveyed in 2009 than in 2001 (28%), and beef was consumed at slightly fewer evening meals in 2009 (43%) than in 2001 (45%).

Steak characteristics and preparation:

Steaks were somewhat heavier and slightly thinner in 2009 than in 2001. Consumers were generally more likely to include a tenderizing marinade in 2009 than in 2001. More steaks were cooked to medium-well or well done (49% in 2009 vs. 44% in 2001), and fewer steaks were cooked to medium doneness (27% in 2009 vs. 35% in 2001). Top sirloin and strip loin steaks were often cooked properly (e.g. grilled). However, boneless cross rib and inside round steaks were often grilled as well, when simmering would have been more appropriate.

Consumer satisfaction:

Regardless of which steak they were given, consumer satisfaction was higher in 2009 than in 2001. This was true for tenderness (76% in 2009 vs. 68% in 2001), juiciness (78% vs. 72%) and flavor (82% vs. 76%). No decreases in consumer satisfaction were reported for any of the steaks in any category. Overall, 86 to 87% of the consumers surveyed were satisfied with the top sirloin and strip loin steaks. Fewer consumers were satisfied with steaks from the boneless cross rib (75%) or inside round (69%). However, tenderness, juiciness and flavor ratings were considerably lower for the boneless cross rib and inside round than for the strip loin and top sirloin.

Consumer complaints:

The most common consumer complaints were related to toughness (39%), dryness (14%) and lack of flavor (10%). This (and the lower consumer satisfaction for the boneless cross rib and inside round) might be related to preparation methods. The boneless cross rib and inside round steaks were often not marinated before being cooked improperly (e.g. grilled, when they should have been simmered). In fact, these steaks were marinated much less than half the time, and were cooked properly less than 5% of the time, even if cooking instructions were provided. When consumers were asked "why wasn't your steak perfect", less than 20% of the consumers surveyed felt it was due to their preparation methods; over 80% blamed the beef. Efforts to increase the visibility, readability or consistency of cooking instructions on retail beef packages may help solve some of these problems. However, industry may need to introduce effective tenderness enhancing interventions that will allow tough cuts of beef to be tenderized before they are offered for sale to the retail consumer.

What it means:

Efforts to improve the eating quality of Canadian beef appear to be making progress. Programs to educate consumers regarding proper preparation and cooking techniques for low-value cuts need to continue, as do efforts to develop processing interventions that effectively tenderize beef.

Other parts of this study will also survey feedlot-to-packing plant management practices as well as the incidence of carcass defects (bruising, injection site lesions, etc.) to help identify additional ways to improve beef quality. Together with other initiatives to improve beef quality through refined genetics, better cattle production, carcass management, and product handling practices, these results should help the beef industry to improve consumer satisfaction further.

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