

FURTHER PROCESSING RABBIT MEAT TO INCREASE PROFITS

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We know that rabbit meat is low in sodium, low in fat, easily digestible and all white meat. Based on that, we would expect a large, readily accessible market but that often is not the case. There are several factors that may be influencing the market.

One problem often expressed is the so-called Easter Bunny Syndrome where people don't want to eat rabbit meat because it reminds them of the Easter Bunny, Peter Rabbit, Thumper or numerous other rabbit characters. While I agree that this could be a problem as rabbit meat is marketed now, I contend that we, in fact, are not marketing the correct product in the correct manner to the correct consumer base. When we make the needed changes in our marketing methods, the Easter Bunny Syndrome will have little importance. In the meantime, perhaps we should sell rabbit meat as "chevon de conejo"!

Another problem may be the price of rabbit meat. At the supermarket, rabbit meat often costs \$3.55 a pound yet the producer only gets \$.85 a pound from the processor. How does that happen? For simplicity let's assume a 50% dressing percentage. That means that when the processor buys a 4 lb. live rabbit, the meat he buys costs him \$1.70 per pound. He then has a processing cost, say \$.30, and we'll let him have a profit of \$.30. The meat is now worth \$2.30 a pound. The processor sells to a broker who may add another \$.25 so the meat reaches the supermarket at \$2.55 a pound. The supermarket will mark the product up 30-50% putting the price to \$3.55.

So what? It is a fact that most meat buyers, especially women, buy meat based on total package cost rather than price per pound. In our example, we are offering a two pound cut-up carcass in a package costing \$7.10! We have to remember that rabbit meat does not have universal acceptance like other meat products such as beef, pork or chicken so an expensive package like that may not sell very easily.

Several years ago, some of my colleagues carried out a survey of consumer attitudes toward rabbit meat in Louisiana and parts of Texas. They found that the consumers considered the positive nutritional attributes of rabbit meat of minor importance and they considered that rabbit meat to be inferior to chicken, beef or pork. The respondents listed the following in order of importance when buying meat: freshness, low fat, taste, price and low cholesterol. Non-users were reluctant to try rabbit meat. The persons most likely to consume rabbit meat were 18-34 year college graduates in professional or administrative positions with incomes of more than \$50,000 a year (McLean-Meyinsse et al. 1994).

There are several methods that can be used to overcome these negative attitudes. These include niche marketing, specialty production systems, targeting consumers and providing products consumers want. Niche marketing may include tapping into ethnic markets. Maybe the products can be sold at a Farmer's Market rather than through a mainstream processor. Special processing techniques may be used. For instance if a customer wants the carcass with the head on but skinned, or with the feet on, or something like that, do it. It is worth money. Specialty production systems might involve using "rabbit friendly" housing to satisfy animal welfare advocates. Rearing rabbits without the use of pesticides, no antibiotics or other health oriented systems might be useful. Grass fattening to provide a leaner carcass with whiter fat also has potential.

We have to know who our consumers are and target our advertising and products to them. There are four very important groups who might be willing to pay \$3.50 a pound or more for a meat with which they are not familiar.

- ⌘ YUPPIES - Young Upwardly Mobile Professionals with lots of disposable income.
- ⌘ YAUPPIES - Young Aspiringly Upwardly Mobile Professionals don't have as much money as the YUPPIES but they are getting there.
- ⌘ DINCS - Double Incomes, No Children. Two professionals with high salaries and little time. They want food that is easy to prepare, healthful and readily available.
- ⌘ GRUMPIES - Grown Up Mature Persons. The kids are out of college, the house is paid for, but the big salary keeps coming in.

Heart patients are another group we need to target. We know the benefits to them of our product. We just have to let them know about it. This brings up the question of advertising. If we wish to address the groups outlined above, the local newspaper is probably not the best place to invest our advertising dollars. The advertising should be placed where the clientele will see it and, as

important, should be in a form they will read and believe. Similarly, rabbit meat should be sold in locations where the clientele make their purchases.

Packaging is also an important factor. Producers may find a cut-up carcass in a tray pack attractive, but if we want to approach our targeted consumers, we need to use more engaging packaging methods. Rabbit meat, for the most part, is sold as a whole or cut-up carcass. Is this what our consumer base wants? Probably not. They are more likely to want the thick meaty cuts like the hind legs or the loin. That leaves the question of what to do with the forequarter. Maybe we could do a take off on the poultry industry and merchandise spicy, chewable "Cincinnati Wings" made from the front legs of the carcasses. Or, we could debone the forequarters.

Our consumers are, for the most part, short of time so they prefer foods that are microwave ready. That means development of breaded nuggets, cutlets or other re-formed meat products. Some work has been done with that and rabbit meat can be used to make tasty products. Two problems that need to be addressed include the high cost of hand deboning and the fact that rabbit meat doesn't bind well in re-formed products. We have research underway on methods of mechanical deboning. When we are able to make that feasible, the research to determine what starches or gums can be added to overcome the binding problems will be started.

In summary we can say that rabbit meat is a good product but consumer attitudes are poor. To overcome these problems, we need to carefully identify and target our consumers, then provide the products they want.

Reference

McLean-Meyinsse, P. E., J. Hui and J. Meyinsse. 1994. Consumer perceptions of, and attitudes toward, rabbit meat. *J. Agribusiness*, 12:55-67.