



Cutting to the Chase

180 degrees of bacon

(The views and opinions expressed in this blog are strictly those of the author.)

If there was one consistent theme in the meat industry of the 1990s, it was "Lean." Ranchers, packers and processors began to respond; leaner, longer, stretchier cattle were bought in. Super-muscled, highly lean pigs were bought in. Packers implemented very accurate and consistent lean measuring technology for back fat and carcass percentage lean, and hardly a week went by without the announcement of the introduction of some new fat-free, fat-reduced, 99 percent lean product. The only problem was that most, if not all, of those products tasted like crap.

Well, there was one pork product that backed into this void and has been hot ever since: the infamous pork belly and its processed form, bacon.

Looking back, I cannot remember a single product hammered worse for its fat characteristics than bacon. There were hundreds of articles saying the only way we would use bellies in the U.S. would be to skin them and chop them up for trimmings. Well, something went wrong on the way to the sacrificial stake; unfortunately, it was precipitated by a terrible tragedy — the deadly E. coli outbreak suffered at Jack in the Box in 1993. As restaurants responded by cooking to higher temperatures to kill the bug, hamburgers suddenly did not taste so good.

Enter bacon, long famous for its flavor and taste. The next thing you know, bacon is a part of about any type of sandwich you can imagine. At the time, bellies had long been trading roughly at about half the price of hams. There was a huge seasonality to them. Frozen bellies were the dominant meat or livestock item traded on the Merc. But quickly, as fast-food restaurants jumped on using bacon, that seasonality began to disappear. Bacon year-round was a significant part of all types of dishes and sandwiches. How could health critics effectively attack it? It was now just part of a main dish. Today you see fresh bellies, because their use is constant, freely trading at up to two times the price of hams. Frozen bellies, especially as a trade in the futures market, have just about disappeared.

In America we cut a hog carcass differently than anyone else in the world, so our bellies are very different from, say, those of Asia or Europe. We cut generally between the first and second rib. In Europe and Asia they cut at the 5-6 rib, producing among other cuts a very short belly. Most of these countries make what is called a "single rib" belly. Instead of lifting the



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spare rib, as we do in the U.S., the lean is taken from the ribs and left on the belly. This makes for another layer of lean and a very different looking belly than we have. Also, in Asia, unlike in the U.S., most of the bellies are sold and used as fresh. What we call Canadian bacon, which is sliced very thin from a cured pork loin, is what they use for bacon. The Europeans and Japanese call our bacon "streaky bacon" because of the appearance of the fat. However, you see "streaky bacon" becoming more popular in these countries because of the taste.

Bacon, facing culinary extinction for years, is now royalty. How much longer it will ride the wave of popularity is anyone's guess. It sure does taste good, though.

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