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Nebraska processor finds niche market with "beef straws"

By Michael Fielding on 1/10/2012

They're called "beef straws," and they're the brainchild of Ben Hirko, an Iowa bartender who more than a year ago came up with the idea of hollowing out beef sticks to use in his Bloody Marys.

Now he's partnered with a small Nebraska processor to produce up to 10,000 per week using a custom-built machine that removes the center of the beef stick.

"It's a terribly labor-intensive process," Chad Lottman, who owns C & C Processing Inc., told **Meatingplace**. "Originally I thought it was a crazy idea, and we were busy enough at the time."

Several months later Hirko - who hadn't yet found a processor to work with him - called back after extensive testing on the machine proved to Lottman that he was on to something. Hirko and his business partner Nathan Klostermann have sold the straws to nearly 100 outlets, including bars and liquor stores.

The product, called Benny's Bloody Mary Beef Straws, is made from 8-inch-long beef sticks produced by the 17-year-old company, a USDA-inspected facility that does everything from beef and pork slaughter to further processing.

The beef straw concept fits well with C & C's business model, Lottman said. "I'm in a town of 300 people, and I have pretty much all the slaughter business there is to have for miles," he said. "It's hard to put a marketing effort into your own products, so we've gone into the private label side of things in recent years."

Doing so means that he needs to be flexible with the market. For instance, he'll soon discontinue the 10-count package in favor of a smaller five-count package, having realized that with the product's short shelf life, "it's better for a bartender to open a small package of a few sticks at a time."

Still, he admits he's enjoying the niche market. "It's a truly unique item," he added.