

How to get more value out of the pork loin and belly

By [Guest Contributor](#) on 5/12/2014

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When looking at the value of pork cuts throughout the pig, the entire pork industry is still looking for ways to find additional value for pork middle-meats, namely the pork loin.

Other cuts such as the fresh pork leg and belly also offer opportunity for creative and savory eating experiences that could help [add additional value](#).

Big opportunities for pork exist for a variety of reasons; the rising price of other protein sources, culinary trends that heavily utilize pork, efforts to improve pork quality, and recent pork industry efforts to help provide customers with information that can improve their pork eating experience.

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Road to recovery

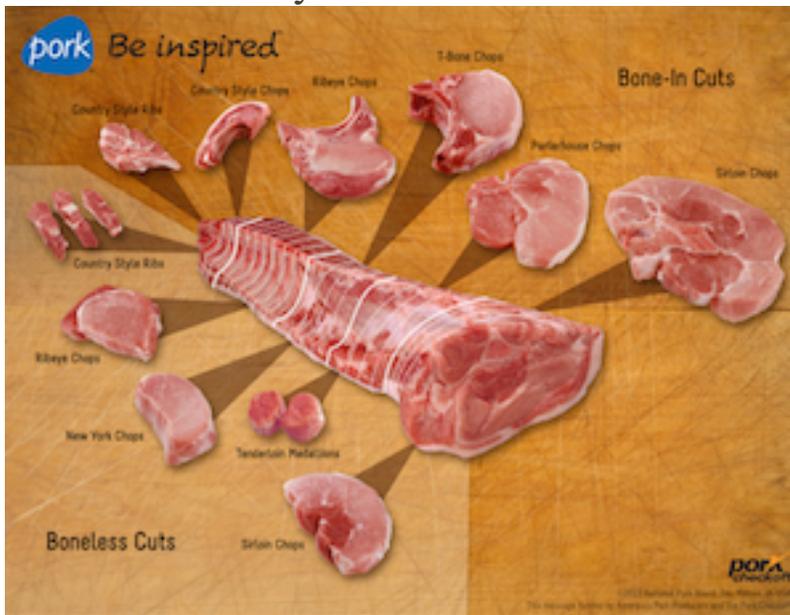


Fig. 1

In May 2011 the USDA announced that pork could be safely cooked to an internal temperature of 145 degrees F with a three-minute rest. This milestone was the first step down a long “road to recovery” for

the majority of consumers who overcook pork.

Certain pork cuts have traditionally been cooked to a higher degree of doneness, but data shows nearly half of consumers don't know about proper cooking temperatures. The new temperature information was then followed up with new nomenclature for 14 cuts of pork in 2013. This nomenclature change came based on research that shows consumers have a hard time understanding the variety of cuts in the meat case or what to do with them if and when they make a purchase.

The new simplified names and revised labels, approved by both AMS and the FSIS, were announced in 2013 and are being rolled out throughout the U.S. with positive feedback. Figure 1. shows a detailed photograph of a whole pork loin, bone in (401) and cuts (both bone in and boneless) with the new nomenclature names provided. These cuts provide huge opportunity to add value in the loin in both the retail and foodservice sector.

Retail opportunities

A primary strategy of improving sales and increasing pork loin value in retail has been the nomenclature changes and reducing cooking temperatures of pork. Porterhouse and Rib Eye chops have been able to drive value in retailers that have embraced the change.

A tracking study done in 2013 with one U.S. retailer found that the new name changes helped significantly drive up both pounds of pork sold (+12.9 percent) and sales dollars (+4.07 percent).

Combine these factors with the new "grill it like a steak" summer promotional campaigns for pork and it may help to drive up value, volume sold -- and satisfied customers.

Foodservice opportunities

The emergence of chef-driven restaurants over the last several years has placed real value in the cook's ability to learn and use true culinary craft and technique. Following the bistro tradition of France, chefs are showcasing their talents and running successful businesses by using simple and often under-valued products.

Creating dishes that are skillful, creative and layered in complex flavors, chefs are able to lure diners back to experience meals they enjoyed and are not likely to cook at home.

There are real opportunities to make great pork dishes and profit by skillfully using the pork loin and fresh leg of pork -- the pig's value

cuts.

The pork loin has been consistently selling for about 80 cents-per-pound less than bellies, and loins have been a [bargain for foodservice operators](#) to purchase and make good profit. Pork loins and chops take skill and care when cooking, just like many other value cuts. The difference is in the preparation and cooking process. Imparting deep flavor and cooking to an exact temperature takes as much or more skill than creating the perfect braised belly. Properly brining a whole muscle cut also can help to enhance flavor and moisture, and cooking a chop to a perfect degree of doneness and allowing to rest can provide a guest with an amazing eating experience.

Outback Steakhouse recently added a pork porterhouse chop to their Butcher's Cuts section of the menu. This bone-in, loin chop is marinated and cooked to order on a choice of wood fire or conventional grill. Servers have been trained to ask each patron what temperature of doneness he would prefer.

Fresh leg

Approaching the fresh leg of pork as a group of muscles, rather than one big ham, provides a great opportunity for a menu, showcasing skills and profit potential.

Seam out the fresh leg into the inside, outside, eye, knuckle and shank meat and use each muscle separately. They each have very different characteristics and will perform differently when cooked. One fresh leg can provide a knuckle to roast or cure and smoke as a small, lean ham; an inside muscle for scaloppini, medallions or Milanese; an outside eye muscle for small steaks; and outside muscle that grinds really well for dumpling fillings or ragu. There will also be enough shank meat, trim, skin and bones to make a rich pork stock for Tonkotsu ... all for less than the price of ground beef.

Improving pork quality

When evaluating the techniques and hard work that go into the huge task of improving the value of individual pork products it is important to consider pork quality attributes such as tenderness, juiciness and flavor.

Simply labeling a package with an attractive name and trying to educate consumers about cooking technique is all for nothing if the product purchased is predestined to have poor quality from the start.

Pork's ability to retain moisture and have improved flavor is a true "farm-to-fork" process that has numerous factors associated with creating good pork quality such as genetics, feeding, transportation, handling and processing techniques.

When selecting fresh pork the best simple advice to provide consumers with is selecting pork that has a darker red color and is not pale. There will be much more to come on pork quality and pork opportunities in the future as technology, science and increased global demand help drive value.

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