

Making Schmacon; beef cut gets new USDA product classification



By [Rita Jane Gabbett](#) on 6/5/2014

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Some call Schmacon beef's answer to bacon, but creator Howard Bender

sees it as a brand new beef product from a new cut of beef and has big plans to market it for breakfast and beyond.

Bender is a culinary Institute of America trained chef who owns Schmaltz Deli in suburban Chicago. His new product has been getting a lot of attention since it won a National Restaurant Association Food and Beverage Innovations (FABI) Award in March. It's also enjoying marketing support from The Cattlemen's Beef Board, funded by the Beef Checkoff. Meatingplace sat down with Bender to hear more about this product that is so new it warranted its own USDA product classification — "smoked and cured glazed beef slices."



Meatingplace: How is this product like bacon and how does it differ?

BENDER: It's distinctly not bacon, because it's distinctly beef. We are keeping it a whole muscle, natural piece of meat, so it is a little more inconsistent in some of the curves and size. It has a nice curl on it. It's a natural cut of meat.

It cooks up in a lot of different ways that are far more simplistic and a better yield than traditional pork bacon. It's sweet. It's smoky. It's got the essence of beef in it. You get the crunch and the curl, past that, all the similarities kind of go away.

Meatingplace: How long did it take you to develop this product?

BENDER: This product was two years in the making. An immense amount of our time initially was working with the meat industry. Really opening

those doors was the National Cattleman's Beef Association and the Beef Innovations Group.

Meatingplace: What beef cut are you using?

BENDER: It's a proprietary cut. It's a special cut that we've been able to get a couple of meat processors to manufacture for us. It is coming from what you or I would call the belly. About 10 percent to 20 percent of this cut is currently considered trim. It's a long stretch. So, when you think about the machinery we use to slice a nice consistent piece, we are cutting a very long almost rectangular kind of cut of meat, which if you look at the Meat Buyer's Guide, there's no number that really matches to this.

Meatingplace: How are you working with processors?

BENDER: We needed to prove that we could, in different manufacturing facilities, ramp this up. So, we've actually tested it in five [meat processing] facilities around the country. We are smoking it to 165 degrees, but it is processed in the raw room, so it is a ready-to-cook product. It crisps in an oven in about 8 minutes.

We're in the process of working with another manufacturer that has impinging ovens, and it's going to help us finish a ready-to-eat product. A lot of QSRs don't want to cook or even crisp. They want it ready to go onto the sandwiches, and we're working on that. And also, we're working on a salad topping, pizza topping called Schmacon Bits.

I'm learning very quickly that this is not a product that one manufacturing facility can handle, so we're working with a wonderful manufacturer in Iowa that has been spectacular in helping us ramp up. They have an expertise in bacon. Nobody, in my opinion does a better job of smoking the meat than they do.

We are also working already with a Halal certification group, because there's some questions about the uniqueness of it and where throughout the world that this product can have some applications.

Meatingplace: Will you target the kosher market?

BENDER: We do not see that as a key market for this product. We do not plan to make a kosher product. I'm Jewish and I can tell you that my friends that do keep kosher, probably aren't going to eat a bacon-like product that looks like bacon. There is potentially a marketplace for this in kosher, but the obstacles are immense.

Meatingplace: How many pounds are you getting out of a carcass?

BENDER: We'll get two 13, 14-pound pieces as a raw material. They can get a little bigger. We'd like them to, but we also want them pretty lean.

Meatingplace: Are you going after the bacon market?

BENDER: We're going to compete with turkey bacon, and pork bacon, and all of those things, but there's no mentality to this is going to substitute pork bacon.

Meatingplace: How does it compare to bacon in terms of yield?

BENDER: A normal pound of pork bacon (16 ounces) may yield you about 4.5 ounces of good bacon. A one-pounder of Schmacon will yield 10 to 12 ounces. For foodservice, the advantage is timeline and yield. The typical burger, chicken sandwich or club may take three slices of bacon. Because its yield is so high, Schmacon is a two-slice topper.

Meatingplace: What type of equipment are you using?

BENDER: We're using a bacon knife, a bacon-slicing machine to slice the product. We're not using a bacon press. Beef fat is so different, if you use a bacon press, it just splits the meat in half, and it really doesn't work. We've got some equipment that is proprietary to us.

Meatingplace: How will you distribute?

BENDER: Sysco has created the item codes in its systems nationwide. A number of Sysco houses around the country are about to bring it into stock.



Meatingplace: What types of applications have foodservice companies been interested in?

BENDER: There are a couple of very high-end clubs that have an international clientele that have been testing it in breakfast buffets and testing it on entrée dishes. There's a huge chain that's an international restaurant group that is testing it right now in their kitchens in a couple of their different restaurant concepts.

Some folks that are testing it for breakfast applications, even chopped and the bits for ingredients within breakfast burritos and things like that. One

chain is testing it as a topping, as a condiment, as a wrapping. One is testing it in different appetizer and bar menu applications.

I've also talked to people who work with the college food service, and they're always looking for new interesting food.

Meatingplace: What about cost?

BENDER: The cost per slice can be slightly higher than pork bacon, but you're only going to use two slices, not three. It costs about \$5 per pound.

Meatingplace. You are bringing out this product at a time when beef is at all-time high prices. What are the implications?

BENDER: Right. Prices will go up and down, including ours. I think that if you can prove a product out like this in a market like this, then a lot of those other hurdles kind of resolve themselves.

Meatingplace: What about selling Schmacon at retail?

BENDER: We're looking at a 12-ounce package with 18-22 slices per pound. And we've tested it in a couple of facilities. We've run product already in the package. And we're talking with two slicer packers right now for producing our retail package. I see it going into grocery stores by the end of the third quarter.

(Editor's note: To read more about this new beef product, see "[Bacon, Schmacon](#)" in the June issue of Meatingplace In Print.)