

THE MEAT OF THE MATTER



Consumer demand for “safer” meat products has led some producers and processors down a non-traditional path
BY JACK KOHANE

Disenchanted with mass production meat and poultry farming, Doug and Kathy Storey, who have run their 480-acre Grandview, Man. family farm since 1987, opted for pasture-raised organic livestock. “We tried traditional farming, but felt uncomfortable about the increasing need for chemicals to boost production,” says Kathy. “We didn’t want to go the factory farming route that frequently uses drugs to produce year-round meat supplies.”

With the specter of food-borne illnesses and animal diseases hovering over the Canadian beef and poultry industries, the Storeys feel the time is right to market their organic beef, pork, chickens, eggs and grains. “Grass-fed beef lowers the risk of mad cow disease and *E. coli* infection in livestock,” says Doug. “As demand has increased, so has the development of a more effective organic marketing system. Now we sell truckloads of animals, and our meat products are sold in local grocery stores.”

Although organic beef and pork remain a supermarket rarity because of their premium prices (up to three times higher than conventional beef and pork), prices are expected to decrease as production levels rise over time. To date, little



data exists on the make-up of the Canadian organic market. On the Alberta government’s website it’s noted that organic meat – beef, pork and chicken – represents one per cent of the \$650-million organic market, although growth rates for organic foods are generally in the double digits. When compared to the two- to four-per-cent growth rate for the total retail food market, the sales increase in organic products looks attractive to retailers.

Consumers with rising incomes, shifting dietary preferences, and concerns over their diet and health are also driving the demand for foods from alternative sources. “Food safety is a major issue for us,” says Mel Fruitman, vice-president of the Ottawa-based Consumers’ Association of Canada. “Canadians have expectations that everything edible is safe. That’s impossible due to the various levels of jurisdiction monitoring the testing and distribution of meat products. Most of us don’t understand the complexity of the food business, but we do believe that when a problem arises, the necessary actions will be taken – and quickly.”

Recalling his frustration with government agencies during the 2003 BSE outbreak, Fruitman says, “We felt their reac-



Kathy Storey, along with husband Doug, now successfully market organic beef, pork, chicken, eggs and grains produced at their Grandview, Man. farm.



tion time was too slow in alerting the public. Could this also happen in an avian flu crisis? Because of the BSE experience, we think the food safety network may now be better prepared to deal with it.” Fruitman also admits organics can be confusing for consumers. “Organics sound appealing, but there have been reports debating whether livestock raised hormone-free on pesticide-free pastures are safer than those raised on conventional farms,” he says. “Consumers don’t know who to believe.”

But Terry Kremeniuk believes in bison. “As Canadians shop around for BSE-proof meat, it’s causing a bison boomlet,” says the associate executive director of the Canadian Bison Association (CBA), headquartered in Regina, Sask.,

“Bison is ideal for people who want to improve their diet, but hate to give up the pleasure of red meat.”

and representing 1,000 producers raising about 500,000 bison. “BSE is no threat to bison because they’re primarily fed pasture grasses and raised without the use of growth hormones, stimulants, antibiotics or animal by-products. Bison is ideal for people who want to improve their diet, but hate to give up the pleasure of red meat.” Bison meat contains less fat and calories than skinless chicken, and is handled the same as any other type of meat when used for braising, roasts, steaks and chops.

With this myriad of meat choices, cattle and poultry industries are beefing up their images and animal management strategies in the ongoing battle for market share. “Millions of dollars are being spent by meat producers and processors on new technologies to test for BSE, salmonella, *E. coli* and other animal diseases, as well as for new equipment, new sanitation methods, and new packaging to maximize food safety,” says Jim Laws, executive director of the Canadian Meat Council in Ottawa.” And because science has shown that stressed-out livestock tend to yield poorer-quality meat, animal welfare is becoming a much more impor-

tant issue. "There have been incredible improvements made to ensure animals are kept calm, and that proper lighting and non-slip floors are put in place for the animal's safety," notes Laws.

Despite those enhancements, the impact of animal disease outbreaks continues to ripple through the food industry. The latest Agriculture and

Agri-Food Canada figures show Canadian federally inspected cattle slaughter was flat in 2005 and in 2004, at 3.7 million head each year. Export sales to the U.S. in 2006 were \$2.7 billion, up from \$2.5 billion in 2005, but lagging behind the pre-BSE stampede pace of \$4 billion in 2002. Meanwhile, Canadian domestic per capita consumption of beef in 2005 was just over 23 kg per person, up from 22.5 kg in 2004, while

veal was .47 kg, mutton and lamb was .46 kg, and pork was 10 kg.

"The slight downturn in 2004 was partially attributed to the fact that a lot of consumers' freezers were full of beef, which they bought in late 2003 at a relatively cheap price when surplus supplies were available," explains Andrea Brocklebank, research analyst for the Canadian Cattlemen's Association in Calgary. "We're seeing consumer confidence in beef building again." Laws is also upbeat about meat's long-term future. "Organics have their place in the market, and demand will grow," he says. "Ready-to-eat foods are heating up sales, and meats containing omega-3 herald new opportunities."

Lisa Spencer, spokeswoman for the Ottawa-based Chicken Farmers of Canada (CFC), is similarly optimistic about her own industry. "Despite the focus on avian influenza, consumers continue to view poultry as a chief protein source," she says. Per capita consumption rates and poultry production (accounting for over 21 per cent of the total annual meat production in Canada) remain steady. In 2006 poultry production in Canada was about 1.14 billion kg, one per cent smaller than 2005. In 2005, per capita poultry consumption increased over 2004 by almost one per cent to nearly 37 kg consumed per person in Canada. That compares to about 30 kg 10 years ago.

The flap over avian influenza is riveting the poultry industry on food safety. "But the Canadian chicken industry can't isolate itself from the world poultry marketplace," says Spencer. "We're doing our part by re-evaluating our strategies and protocols. We've made adjustments to our 'year-round' as well as our 'during an outbreak' bio-security measures. We're working closely with the industry and government on testing, surveillance, pre-emptive culls and standards. And we've created a series of tools and products to help educate the consumer and to promote positive messages on chicken. Our food safety website has over 5,000 hits daily."

Mike Sadiwynk, vice-president of Industry Relations for Toronto-based GS1 Canada, which promotes global standards for the identification of

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goods, takes a different approach to food safety. "While governments have established systems to maximize food quality and safety (for example HACCP), it's also true that human error, in part, has helped create the spread of diseases and illnesses, which in turn has created the need for an established product traceability standard for the food industry."

Since 2003, GS1 Canada has spearheaded the Can-Trace initiative, a collaborative effort teaming the food industry and Ag-Canada, in developing traceability standards for all food products sold in Canada. "Can-Trace provides a whole chain safety net for traceability information that's shared by trading partners, enabling a consistent approach to traceability from farm gate to retail," says Sadiwynk. "Anyone from mom-and-pop producers to mega-corporations can incorporate the standard into their business practices."

The Storeys already boast their own traceability best practices. "We document everything – every animal, every birth, every delivery to market," says Kathy, acknowledging that traceability is essential to safety. "We're all consumers and everyone wants assurances that the food we eat is the safest it can be," she says. [FC]

CLOINED MEAT ON THE MENU?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently took a giant step forward to bring the sale of meat products made from cloned livestock closer to supermarket shelves.

Basing its decision on a four-year review of data, the FDA's draft risk assessment, released in late 2006, states that it found "no unique risks for human food consumption identified in cattle, swine or goat clones." Since then the document has ignited a firestorm of debate, pitting consumer groups against the biotechnology industry, which favours the technology's use primarily for breeding.

"I'm all for science, but cloning bothers me," says Mel Fruitman, spokesman for the Consumers' Association of Canada. "This is the stuff of science fiction and a leap into the world of artificial foods. I believe most consumers will refuse to eat it for religious or philosophical reasons."

The most contentious issue is the labelling of cloned animal products. The FDA sees no reason why food from cloned animals needs special labelling, and that cloned food products, if approved, could be exported. "Proper labelling is a must," insists Fruitman. "The verdict on the safety of cloned food products is still out. Our organization's position is firm: Meat from cloned animals sold in Canada must be labelled so people can make informed buying decisions."

Jason Bouzanis, a Health Canada spokesperson, says the ministry is consulting with Environment Canada (which governs the use of cloning technology) as well as Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to prepare a joint document stating Canada's position to the FDA. The FDA has set April 2, 2007 as the deadline for public comment on the issue, after which it will decide whether to lift a moratorium on meat and milk from cloned livestock. If approved, the U.S. would be the first country to introduce cloned food products into the food supply.

However, some in the industry aren't waiting for that decision. Last month natural food retailers Whole Foods and Wild Oats both said they will not carry meat and milk products from cloned animals.

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