



# New Traditions

Halal and kosher foods are increasing in popularity, and not simply for religious reasons

BY KEN MARK

As Canadians become more health conscious, they're also starting to open their minds and mouths to alternative diet items such as kosher and halal meats and foods. Many people are attracted by the belief that these meat products are cleaner and more natural than conventional products, which may make them better tasting. Other consumers, and not simply animal rights activists, are increasingly concerned over the treatment of animals before they are slaughtered, leading them to halal and kosher meats.

Most mainstream Canadian consumers lack any detailed knowledge of how kosher and halal products are produced. While observant followers of the Jewish faith, in the case of kosher foods, and the Muslim faith for halal, must understand these rules to avoid eating prohibited foods, many others who don't follow religious dietary rules still want to know they're getting proper value. In this way, the market for halal and kosher foods is much like the organic or natural foods market. In both categories products are more expansive than conventional ones, with kosher meats typically costing as much as 50 per cent more than a similar conventional cut, and about a five-per-cent premium for halal. The added costs are due to the religious supervision required during slaughter and carcass processing.

For both faiths, eating pork and meat from predatory animals and birds is forbidden. There are also a number of similarities in how animals are slaughtered. Beyond that the rules diverge, and by common consent kosher rules are far more complicated. In the simplest terms, what is considered kosher or halal is the result of centuries-old traditions

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and practices. The more recent decisions in terms of practices for both faiths is the result of interpretations of scriptures and other related works by religious scholars. For example, U.S. rabbis have concluded that bison is kosher, while Canadian rabbis are still making up their minds. As for halal, there are recurring controversies over whether hand or machine slaughter

of chickens is the more acceptable practice. Unfortunately, there is no over-arching authority for determining either kosher or halal, and there are reputedly several hundred different kosher councils around the world and possibly as many for halal. For consumers, the key concern is that there is a seal of approval from a certifying religious group, giving them an objective evaluation of the meats.

As the Muslim population continues to grow, halal in particular represents a new market opportunity for food producers. Although no regular surveys of halal food buying habits exist, SPINS, a San Francisco, Calif.-based firm that tracks U.S. sales of organic and natural foods, is expected to start covering the halal market in 2007. In Canada halal products are more of a mystery to most consumers since the Muslim presence in this country is relatively recent.

Halal rules are much less complex than those governing kosher foods. Meat is considered halal as long as the animal is not one of the forbidden species, or is diseased, and as long as a Muslim man kills it swiftly with a sharp knife or instrument, without severing the head, while uttering a brief prayer. As simple as this sounds, as with all religious observances there are disputes over how each of these activities should be done. Different jurisdictions accept

varying practices yet still issue a halal certificate.

Maple Lodge Farms has been a pioneer in providing halal poultry in Canada since 1990, when it received a halal certificate from the Islamic Society of North America. In June 2003, the company launched its signature Zabiha Halal label. Maple Lodge Farm's product line is approximately

70 per cent frozen and deli, including breakfast strips, sausages and wieners, and 30 per cent fresh. Wieners are its best-selling product. It actively exports to Dubai, Kuwait and Jordan, as well as various Muslim-heavy former Soviet Republics, and it plans to expand its lineup to the U.S. Before the B.C. avian flu outbreak, the company exported products to Malaysia as well, yet ironically, during her May 2006 visit to Toronto, the Malaysian

trade minister announced plans to make Malaysia a hub for halal food exports.

According to Falah Alizzi, the Brampton, Ont.-based Zabiha Halal category manager, the line has enjoyed double-digit growth annually over the past three years. Although the company has not conducted any consumer surveys, Alizzi estimates that non-Muslims account for roughly 10 per cent of total sales. He also believes that the halal chicken market's growth potential has attracted the interest of other major poultry chicken producers, including Maple Leaf Foods, Schneiders and Lilydale.

Most recently, the new Brampton, Ont.-based Halal Monitoring Authority (HMA), has been making its presence known by pushing for a new Canadian halal certification. "We're taking a non-controversial approach to halal," says Omar Subedar, one of the five HMA executive directors. However, the group is a firm supporter of hand rather than machine slaughter of poultry. "We are not trying to create more controversy. However, our certification of halal products will be based on actual inspections of the slaughtering process by one of our followers, rather than simply issuing a certificate to an abattoir," he says. "That's because we don't know what they do when we are not there." At press time, Subedar expects to have about five GTA firms – producers and retailers – signed up, with more to come in other parts of Ontario and across Canada. His group will then turn its attention to other food products.

On the kosher side, conditions for declaring food as kosher are more firmly established. "To gain the Kosher Council seal COR, requires slaughter and processing follow strict guidelines that are closely monitored by specially trained rabbis," says Rabbi Mordechai Levin, executive director of the Toronto-based Kashruth Council of Canada. They use special super-sharp knives with no nicks, and slaughter the animals by hand. A rabbi checks the vital organs for disease, including blowing up the lungs. Typically the rabbi's assessment agrees with that of



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According to *The Canadian Halal Meat Market: An Alternative Market for Alberta's Meat Industry*, funded by Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) and Farming For The Future Farm Demo Project (FFF), the Canadian domestic halal meat market value is estimated at \$214 million, with an average annual household expenditure of \$1,623. On average, Muslim households spend \$31 per week on halal meat products, almost double the Canadian household meat expenditure of \$17 per week, according to 2003 Statistics Canada figures.

The average Canadian Muslim household consumes 5.6 meat servings per day. Halal beef and chicken are the most widely consumed meats, followed by lamb and goat. Of all consumed meat cuts, ground beef ranks first at 16 per cent, followed by chicken legs (15 per cent), bone-in beef and whole chicken (14 per cent). Boneless beef stands in fifth place (12 per cent), followed by chicken breast (11 per cent), beefsteak and chicken drums (10 per cent).

Based on these statistics, the demand for halal meat is predicted to demonstrate consistent growth. According to the 2001 Canadian census, there are approximately 600,000 Muslims in Canada, and an estimated eight to 11 million in the U.S., with a purchasing power of US\$12 billion. Statistics Canada projects that the Canadian Muslim population will double by the end of this decade.

the onsite veterinarian, but on occasion they may reject an animal that the vet has approved.

The removal of the inner organs, and especially the blood vessels, involves close inspection. In fact, for beef cattle, only the top half of the carcass – above the thirteenth rib – is considered kosher. “That means no sirloin steaks,” says Levin. “The packer can sell those cuts to other customers. Rabbis don’t believe that they have the knowledge and skill to deal with removing the blood vessels in the lower half of the carcass.” Rabbis also watch over workers as they rub the carcass with kosher salt to draw off more blood. It’s then soaked three times in containers to wash off the salt. After the meat is finally dried off the rabbi can apply the kosher label.

Kosher certification carries the weight of law in Canada, and companies that sell meat labelled kosher that have not met these rigorous inspection and other standards are considered to have committed fraud. “It’s part of federal legislation,” says Levin. “The legislation also forbids the use of the term ‘kosher-style’ to describe food products.”

For high-volume chicken products, dedicated facilities exist to prevent possible cross-contamination. “Our plant handles thousands of chickens each day,” says Charles Weinberg, Toronto-based president of Chai Kosher Poultry Inc. There are usually five to six rabbis doing the slaughtering, four supervising the salting and washing procedures, as well as a veterinarian and three Canadian Food Inspection Agency inspectors onsite as well. “It’s very hard for us to keep track of who is buying our products,” says Weinberg. “But I’m certain that it’s becoming more popular among non-Jewish consumers.” FC