



SPECIAL REPORT

Injection and Marination

by Allison Bardic, Senior Editor

Whether they're injected, massaged, or vacuum tumbled, marinated products are becoming more prevalent in meat cases everywhere. Consumer benefits range from the tender, moist, characteristics associated with enhanced meats to the convenience of marinated products that are ready to cook, easy to prepare, and packed with flavor.

"We've found there is a significant preference for enhanced products versus non-enhanced products," notes Dan Emery, vice president of marketing for poultry processor Pilgrim's Pride Corporation, Pittsburg, TX. "Consumers may not like the idea of enhancement, but when you show them enhanced product side by side with non-enhanced product and ask them to taste it, they clearly prefer it."

The injection debate

For about a year Pilgrim's Pride has offered a complete line of exact-weight and non-exact-weight enhanced poultry products, generally defined by the industry as fresh, whole-muscle meat that has been injected with a solution of water and other ingredients that may include salt, phosphates, seasonings, and flavorings to enhance its texture, flavor, and consistency.

Among the major forces driving poultry enhancement, Emery points to enhanced products' ability to retain moisture, even when overcooked, resulting in consistent product tenderness. "When you cook enhanced chicken, it doesn't dry out. It's a lot more forgiving than non-enhanced varieties," says Emery. "It's definitely juicier and more tender. The only real negative is that you can't say it's 'all-natural.'"

Similarly, a study focusing on moisture retention, completed last year by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association Center for Research & Knowledge Management and led by Kansas State University's Jim Marsden, noted that, "Beef cuts injected with solutions designed to keep the cut tender and juicy even at higher cooked temperatures might lead to more consistently good eating experiences ... Needle injected or enhanced beef products may be one method that affords the consumer a more consistent eating experience."

Most consumers don't realize they're buying enhanced products when they do, however. Emery observes that his company's Butterball brand of turkey is hugely popular with consumers who have no idea it is enhanced. "No one reads the label, and if you have a superior product, consumers will buy it," he says.

Opponents of enhanced products, however, counter that they are just another way for manufacturers to generate more profits by selling meat that's pumped full of water.

Laurel, MS-based Sanderson Farms this year launched a consumer education initiative designed to shed light on enhanced chicken, for example. "By purchasing this altered chicken, many shoppers are paying for more than they realize - and it's turning out to be extra water, salt, and phosphates," the company contends. "Labeled 'enhanced with chicken broth,' this processed poultry absorbs the liquid, which accounts for up to fifteen percent of the product's weight, and could cost consumers, if all chicken were enhanced in this manner, an extra \$2.9 billion each year."

Sanderson Farms, dedicated to producing 100-percent chicken naturally, emphasizes that it does not add water, salt, and phosphates to increase the weight of its Sanderson Farms brand of fresh chicken. "Consumers need to be made aware that some of the chicken on the market contains extra water, salt, and phosphates," stresses Bill Sanderson, director of marketing for Sanderson Farms. "We urge shoppers to take an extra second to check the label on the front of the package, read the fine print on the back, and look for words like 'enhanced,' 'chicken broth,' or 'solution.'"

Sanderson Farms' initiative was followed up with a public awareness campaign led by the Modesto, CA-based California Poultry Federation (CPF) that also strongly urged consumers to read product labels. "Some markets across the Western United States offer only enhanced chicken in their fresh meat case, which at first glance appears to be fresh but isn't... We want to assure consumers that if they are buying fresh California chicken, they are not paying for water and salt," says CPF President Bill Mattson. "We are not saying there is anything wrong with enhanced chicken, but we do believe that consumers need to be made aware of the issue and should be educated that they have a choice when selecting chicken products from the fresh meat case."

Emery stresses that Pilgrim's Pride's enhanced poultry solution includes a binding agent to help maintain chicken's moisture. "A lot of companies use sodium as a binding ingredient, causing their products' sodium levels to go through the roof, but we use something else," he says, adding that for those consumers who prefer non-enhanced products, the company continues to offer that alternative as well. "Our corporate stance is that we are going to offer both products. Both have a benefit."

Rubs and marinades

An endless variety of marinades also are at processors' fingertips, giving them the ability to build multi-levels of flavor. While the main purpose of marinating is to allow food to absorb flavors of the marinade or, as in the case of tough meat, to tenderize it, rubs typically consist of a blend of dry spices and herbs applied directly to the surface of meat or poultry.

For its part, Smithfield, VA-based Smithfield Packing Co.'s marination techniques combine a pump, then an application of hand-coated rubs. "We believe the benefit is uniform application of rub, and our pump levels are as low or lower than most competitors'," says Jim Schloss, vice president of marketing, Smithfield Foods.

Among the chief advantages of Smithfield's marinated products, Schloss points to their response to the consumer's need for taste, convenience, and variety. Today's trade need to feature items that appeal to consumers who can pick up such products as Smithfield marinated pork, beef, or turkey and have a dinner on the table in 45 minutes or less, he assesses. Other factors include the growing number of children and men who cook, and marinated products' optimal format for grilling which, as Schloss notes, has

"become an American pastime."

Smithfield Packing's marinated products encompass pork, beef, and turkey. Marinated pork varieties include tenderloins, loin filets, center cut loin roasts, center cut boneless chops (regular and thick cut), boneless sirloins, St. Louis ribs, and Chef's Prime roasts, of which Teriyaki, Peppercorn, and Italian Garlic and Herb flavors are consumer favorites.

Smithfield's marinated St. Louis rib flavors are Sweet and Sassy and Burgundy Peppercorn, while the marinated beef is a USDA Choice shoulder tender available in Herb Rubbed, Southern Basted, and Oven Roasted flavors. Turkey tenderloins come in Teriyaki, Southern Basted, and Lemon Pepper varieties.

"The latest meat and poultry marination trends are the use of more cuts such as St. Louis ribs; the move to extend the number of proteins a company markets; and different flavors to appeal to trends such as Pan Asian, various Hispanic cultures, and South American flavors," Schloss adds, noting that Smithfield's only significant production challenge related to the marination process deals with product changeovers. "We constantly search for the flavors that will appeal to the masses and thus enable us to have larger production runs."

Among its marinated products, Excel Corporation, a Wichita, KS-based Cargill Meat Solutions company, offers Sterling Silver® premium beef, pork, turkey, or ham, Honeysuckle White turkey, Shady Brook Farms turkey, and Tender Choice beef. The company's newest offerings include Sterling Silver Lemon Pepper Pork Loin filet, Home-style Pork Tenderloin and Pork Filets, Burgundy Peppercorn Pork Tenderloin, Sweet Ginger Teriyaki Pork Loin Filet, and Tenderloins; Tender Choice Onion Garlic Beef Rib eye, Steakhouse Beef Rib eye, and Lightly Seasoned Rib eye (These flavors are also available for strip loins). In addition, Honeysuckle White/Shady Brook Farms has introduced Lemon Garlic, Rotisserie, and Home-style Turkey Tenderloins.

"The focus [regarding marination] has been to create product lines that improve the consumer eating experience," explains Norman Bessac, vice president of marketing for Cargill Meat Solutions. "We believe the work we have done in marinades and flavorings has allowed us to develop a complete line of products that offer consumers a great eating experience. Because consumers like the flavor and cooking performance, we have seen incremental sales for the category."

Bessac notes that Excel's most notable marination challenge has been to provide products with the correct level of seasoning to achieve an intense flavor without overwhelming the meat's flavor. "Using the right flavorings that do not hurt shelf life has also been important," he adds. "In the non-flavored pork items, making sure that we are adding the right level of marination to positively affect the cooking process without adding too much liquid or salt ... We match up process flow and procedures with the finished product requirements/characteristics. In our experience, we have not found one process that fits all of our needs. Making sure the product exceeds consumer expectations is the key focus and includes flavor, purge, and cooking process."

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