

What's Cooking?

Retailers are leveraging a new wave of beef recipes to attract the plethora of shoppers seeking novel flavor profiles.

By Richard Mitchell, Editor-in-Chief

Recipes are becoming an increasingly prominent fixture in supermarket meat departments.

Merchandisers are flooding cases with protein preparation literature via such vehicles as on-pack labels, countertop brochures and standalone displays. They are seeking to spur sales among the growing base of consumers who have limited cooking skills, but still want unique and flavorful meals.

"Many people don't know how to cook meat unless it's a tender cut that can be grilled," says Marcia Schurer, president of Culinary Connections, a Chicago-based food industry marketing and consulting firm. "Recipes are important as many stores are cutting back on staff, which means there are fewer reference persons in the outlets to provide information."

As recipes become more popular, suppliers, retailers and trade organizations are focusing on new creations.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), for instance, which contracts to manage programs for the Beef Checkoff, is developing recipes at the Beef & Veal Culinary Center in its Chicago office. The Center focuses exclusively on providing food professionals with easy-to-utilize beef and veal information.



The team, which includes chefs and home economists, operate in a kitchen with both household and foodservice appliances and also conduct cookery research and new product testing.

Dave Zino, executive director, says staffers analyze consumer behavior before developing recipes. In addition to leveraging data collected by the NCBA, associates also interview consumers, chefs and retailers.

In response to rising food prices, for instance, Culinary Center staffers are creating more affordable meals, such as burgers, lasagna and casserole dishes, Zino says.

Associates develop recipes for both supermarket meat depart-

ments and delis. A fully cooked pot roast meal with a potato and vegetable, for instance, was designed to compete against the popular rotisserie chicken.

In addition, the Culinary Center is responding to the growth of ethnic populations by creating more Hispanic-, Asian- and Caribbean-oriented recipes.

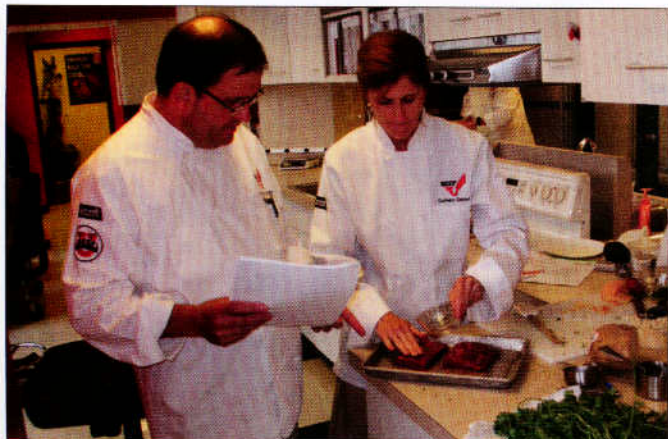
All recipes are intended to be user friendly.

"Consumer cooking skills are on the decline," Zino states. "Shoppers don't want recipes that they are afraid to prepare, which happens when they are unfamiliar with the ingredients."

A consumer focus group organized by the NCBA in February also found that shoppers want recipes with short names; that there should be a manageable amount of ingredients; preparation steps must be simple to follow; and the time it takes to prepare each dish should be clear.



CULINARY CENTER PHOTOS BY RICHARD MITCHELL



Dave Zino, executive director of the NCBA's Beef & Veal Culinary Center, oversees the development of recipes.

"I can develop a recipe that's phenomenal, but it also must meet the average consumer's skill set," Zino states. "It is important to use ingredients that customers recognize and which work well with beef."

Culinary Center recipes, which take about two weeks to create, are tested a minimum of three times in both gas and electronic stoves before being approved. Part-time staffers with culinary backgrounds in such areas as food science and nutrition conduct the tastings.

"I'd rather learn about

a problem in the test kitchen instead of having consumers complain that the recipe didn't work," Zino notes.

Indeed, to insure its tests are accurate, the NCBA operates the Culinary Center in Chicago rather than at its main headquarters in Centennial, Colo., which is 5,544 feet above sea level.

"Cooking times vary at high altitude," Zino says. "Water can boil at 210-degrees Fahrenheit at high altitude (compared to 212 degrees at sea level), so it is more difficult to gage how long an item should be cooked. It is crucial that the information we put out is credible."

Culinary Center staffers last year created 40 beef recipes for the Easy Fresh cooking labels that are affixed to packages in the self-service meat case.

Various recipes also appear on NCBA Web sites, including beefitswhatsfordinner.com and beefretail.org; in

The Healthy Beef Cookbook, which was developed by the Beef Checkoff and the American

Dietetic Association and published in 2006; and in the Beef and Veal Meal Planner, an 80-page book for merchandisers that also features cooking tips and product photography.

In addition, recipes are included in the Beef Checkoff's Beef Training Camp, a training tool that is designed to enhance customer service in retail outlets by educating meat department employees about beef. Among the 14 modules are two new entries—Hispanic Marketing and Customer Service.

Associates now are creating recipes for the chuck roast and round, which Zino says comprise 53 percent of the animal but are undervalued.

"It is an ongoing mission," he states. "We're always looking for the next beef item that will be more popular than the chicken nugget."

Another merchandising goal is to insure that shoppers are properly versed on how to best prepare each specific item. "Cuts are not all cooked the same way, so our job is to take away the difficulty and make it a positive experience," Zino says. **MDR**

