

Increasing lamb consumption

Many Americans say they would be happy to enjoy the flavor of lamb more often, but they just do not think of it. Keys to increasing U.S. lamb consumption include higher visibility for lamb as a main dish option for casual meals and elegant dining, and efforts to ensure lamb is available in the grocery store when consumers shop for food, according to the findings of a national study conducted by Market Solutions L.L.C.

Making lamb a more visible choice when it is available, and getting consumers to ask for lamb when it is not in the meat case, can help to build U.S. lamb consumption. Promotion efforts aimed at getting consumers to think of lamb as an alternative to other meat, poultry and seafood products when they shop for and prepare food can play an important role. After declining for decades, lamb accounts for less than half of one percent of the 220 lbs of meat and poultry that Americans eat each year.

On November 15, 2001 the U.S. government removed import restrictions that have limited American consumers' access to lamb from Australia and New Zealand. This is likely to make a wider variety of lamb products available to American consumers year round. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has also solicited comments on a proposed producer and processor funded check-off program aimed at developing a fund to promote lamb consumption in the U.S.

Almost half of those surveyed associate lamb with special occasions and elegant dining or with holiday meals, especially at Christmas and Easter/Passover, but also New Years, Thanksgiving and a variety of other special occasions. The study found substantial interest in lamb for grilling and barbecues, ethnic cuisine and as an alternative for every day casual dining. Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Indian, and European dishes with lamb were the international and ethnic choices listed most often.

According to the survey, whether they are regular lamb eaters, or have never tried lamb, survey respondents want to be reminded to think of lamb as a choice that will add variety to meals. They also want to know that it is nutritious, healthy and safe, and how to prepare it. Potential lamb eaters want the chance to taste lamb.

Chops, leg of lamb, kabobs and lamb racks are the most frequent lamb cuts that consumers say they prepare at home. Findings indicate many consumers fear lamb is difficult and time consuming to prepare. Recipes and articles in the stores where consumers shop, and in magazines and newspapers can help overcome this. Time and step-saver products and prepared meals containing lamb, such as pre-cut kabobs and other ready-to-cook, ready-to-eat, ready-to-heat and frozen main dishes appeal to 20 percent to 40 percent of consumers.

While the range of lamb products available at the retail level has expanded in recent years, one in four regular lamb eaters and one in three occasional and potential lamb eaters say that when they do think of lamb, they cannot be sure it will be available when they go to the store. In addition, the lamb consumers surveyed spend 9 percent to 16 percent more on groceries each week than others.

Study findings indicate negative advertising aimed at capturing market share may unintentionally contribute to the decline in lamb consumption. A few consumers say negative ads comparing brands or origins of lamb will get them to purchase the advertised product, but many more say such ads are likely to deter them from buying any lamb at all.

The project was commissioned by the National Meat Association, North American Meat Processors Association, Meat and Livestock Australia and Meat New Zealand, with financial support from suppliers of domestic and imported lamb, Superior Farms, Foodcomm International, Australia-New Zealand Lamb Cooperative and Pilot Brands.

The project included focus groups conducted in the Washington, D.C., area and a telephone survey of 830 consumers in eight major metropolitan areas across the U.S. identified as important lamb consuming markets. Those interviewed included a cross-section of regular and occasional lamb eaters and potential lamb consumers who eat other red meats. Consumers were interviewed in higher income areas of Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Miami, Denver, Chicago, San Francisco and Seattle.

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