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Anita Ivanauskas

# Pork grading system based on marbling comes closer to reality

Ontario Pork is spearheading a study to develop a grading system similar to beef. But consumers also have to be educated on how to identify superior cuts of meat

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BY  
PATRICIA GROTENHUIS

Pork products of a consistent quality and marbling have been in demand for years, and new research is bringing them closer to reality.

Research being done with Duroc-cross pigs is finding links between feeding systems and marbling content, as well as discovering what end users of pork products would like to buy. Ontario Pork is spearheading the research, and working closely with all levels of the pork industry to achieve that goal.

"Food service personnel and end users indicated a grading system based on marbling was needed. To do that, we had to find ideal marbling levels and how to get there," says Anita Ivanauskas of Ontario Pork.

The research began in 2006 and, once completed, Ontario Pork hopes to have a grading system similar to the beef system. However, the pork grading will not be mandatory. One major finding from the research is that consumers need to be educated on how to visually identify a superior cut of meat.

At the start of the study, research was done at the Lacombe Research Centre, Lacombe Alta., to find out what consumers look for in pork cuts. The U.S. marbling

scale of 1 to 10, with one being the lowest amount of marbling and 10 being the highest, was used.

Consumers were asked to rank raw meat based on appearance, and cooked meat based on appearance and taste. When viewing raw meat, most consumers sought a meat ranking of one to two, while when the meat was cooked, they found a ranking of five to six most desirable.

Educating consumers to help them understand what good quality cuts of meat look like will be a major task. Be-

fore a grading system can be established, however, a breeding and feeding system which gives consistent marbling has to be developed.

Researchers have been working with producers to find the recipe for consistent pork. Duroc genetics are being researched most heavily because of the high level of marbling.

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The test animals grew more quickly than anticipated, leading to meat which was tougher than desired. The protocols of the study have been altered, so the next group of animals sent to slaughter will be shipped at a younger age.

When the research is completed, Ontario Pork will assist in the development of a voluntary grading program, which will ensure consistent grading across processing facilities. Consumers, however, will play a large role in driving the initiative. The highly marbled pork will be a specialty product and, as such, will be worth a premium.

Ivanauskas believes the demand for marbled pork will be driven by a combination of taste and cost. Once the research is finished, Ontario Pork will be looking to source product from producers. Ontario Pork will also keep in touch with interested food service providers and retail outlets to ensure demand is being met.

"We want to help pork producers differentiate their product from imports and, in our minds, this is one way to do it," says Ivanauskas. ■

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