

Communicating the pork message

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Earlier this year two pieces of market research were carried out on behalf of the British Pig Executive (BPEX) into consumers' perception of pork. The results are encouraging both for pig producers and retailers. Amongst regular consumers, pork satisfies modern attitudes and tastes, but for occasional pork eaters the industry needs to better convey the message that pork is a versatile source of protein.

This article summarises the main findings of the research conducted by Pathway Research. A full report is available from Chris Lamb at MLC's Centre for Consumer and Market Insight.

Quantitative research

The first research project was carried out with regular pork consumers, i.e. consumers who serve pork at home at least once a month. 863 households were given either standard or premium quality pork loin steaks, divided evenly from the Tesco, Sainsbury, Asda and Morrison product ranges, to cook and eat at home. They subsequently took part in 10-minute recall interviews. The research had three objectives:

- To establish quality perceptions and satisfaction with standard and premium pork loin steaks amongst regular users.
- To identify any differences in the quality and satisfaction of standard and premium pork loin steaks.
- To set a robust benchmark for subsequent tracking and/or satisfaction surveys.

- who buys what?

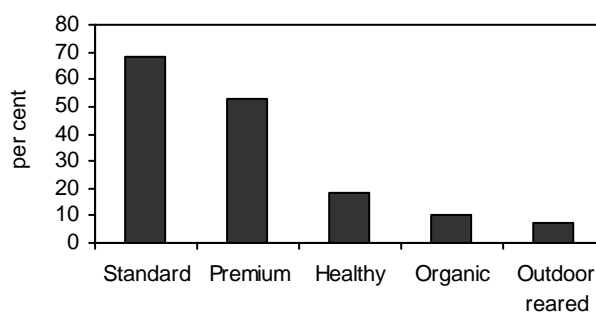
For those who enjoy pork, it is a regular meal. Eight out of 10 serve it at least once a fortnight. Whilst half those in the survey will buy premium range pork, the 'outdoor reared' claim is not strongly recognised, with less than seven per cent of consumers claiming to buy such products.

- enjoyment

Overall, the research shows that consumers rate eating loin steaks as an enjoyable experience, with little difference between standard and premium ranges. The flavour, taste and texture are what consumers particularly like, while the appearance, colour and leanness are also much appreciated.

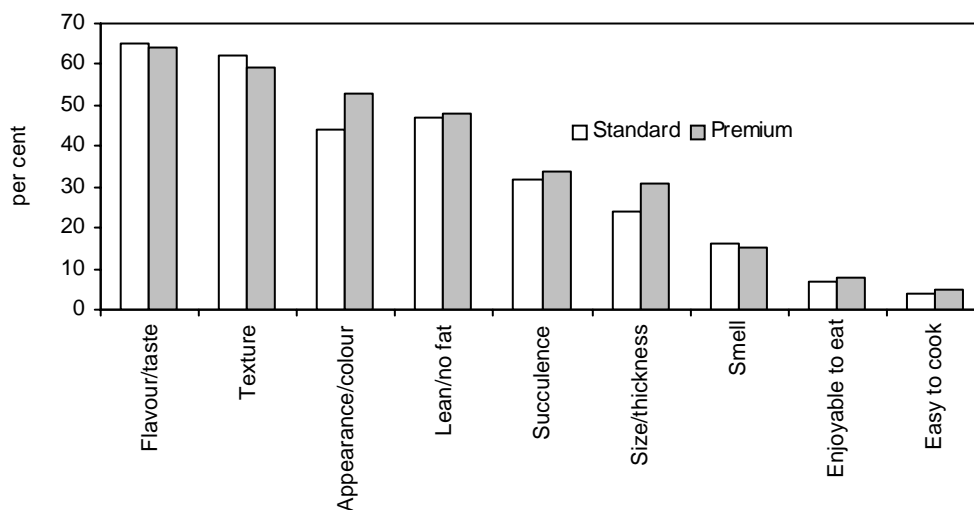
The vast majority of consumers rate pork loin steaks highly. Only one in five voiced any suggestion on how to improve eating quality. While this included the contradictory views of both 'fatty' and 'not enough fat', the criticisms centered around

What ranges have you purchased in the past at your retailer?



texture, with 'bland', 'chewy' and 'dry' among the most common criticisms. Nine out of 10 consumers felt trim levels were about right. These comments applied to both standard and premium ranges in more or less equal measure.

What did you like about the loin steak when you ate it?



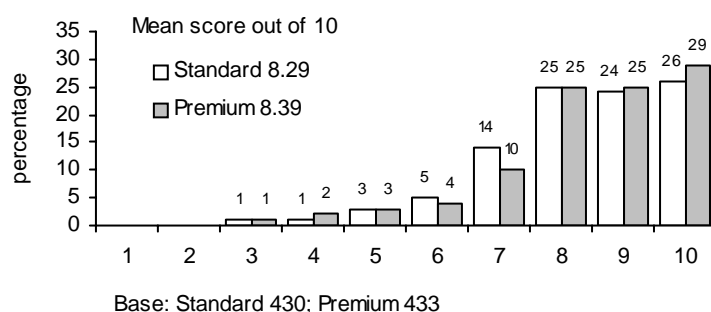
- cooking

Grilling was the most popular method of cooking these pork loin steaks (56 per cent) although, other than traditional salt and pepper, little emphasis was placed on seasoning in their preparation. Almost half of all respondents do not add anything to their pork loin steaks when preparing or cooking. It implies that the range of innovative herbs, spices, sauces and marinades now available in the shops to enhance and transform a pork dish is not sufficiently noticed and is not yet featuring prominently in consumers' recipes.

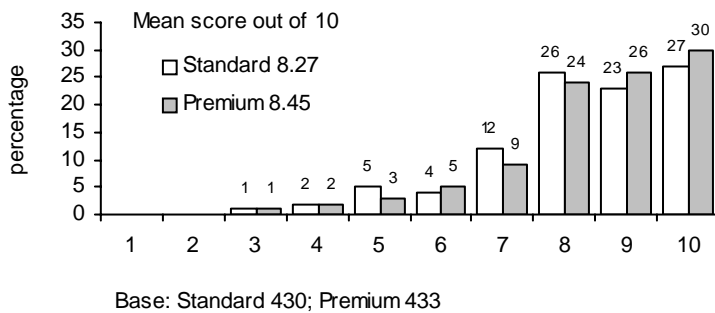
- eating quality

Respondents were asked to rate certain attributes of their steaks once cooked, where '1' was 'disliked very much' and '10' was 'liked very much'. When cooked, pork loin chops are highly rated as tender, succulent and juicy. They deliver on flavour for the overwhelming majority of consumers. Premium steaks rate slightly better than standard steaks. Premium steaks also have a slightly higher mean score for tenderness. The research showed that while both standard and premium range steaks are rated as succulent, premium steaks were considered slightly juicier.

When eating the steak, how much did you rate the flavour?

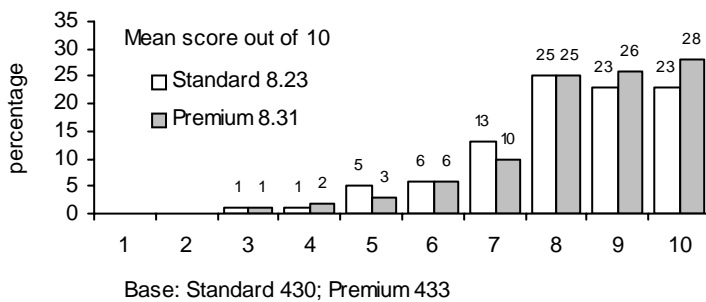


How tender was the pork loin steak once cooked?



Nearly 90 per cent of consumers were either quite or very satisfied with the overall eating quality of their pork loin steaks. Only three per cent expressed any measure of dissatisfaction and there was little discernible difference between standard and premium ranges.

When eating the steak, how succulent and juicy was it?



Only 17 per cent of respondents gave any suggestion on how the eating quality of pork steaks could be improved. There were obviously conflicting views: 21 respondents wanted leaner steaks, 16 wanted more fat; 11 wanted thicker steaks, 9 wanted them thinner.

Conclusion

The results of the research among regular pork users are reassuring. The industry can take credit for producing a product that is much enjoyed but it must guard against complacency.

There are many positive messages to be taken from the research. Consumers need to be made aware not just of the merits of pork the product, but of pork the modern, exciting meal solution. A lot can also be achieved by encouraging consumers to be much more imaginative and adventurous when preparing pork and that the innovative use of herbs, spices, sauces and marinades can enhance and transform any pork dish.

Buying British is about maintaining high standards in the minds of consumers. The industry can do much more to promote the fact that a growing share of British pork is outdoor reared.

With some exception over appearance, there is little that differentiates standard and premium pork loin steaks and both satisfy consumer product requirements. Account does

need to be taken, however, of the differing consumer views on the overall eating quality of pork loin: many appreciate the texture and succulence, but for others these were areas for criticism. Again it may be a case of presenting information on cooking and presentation that ensures a universally enjoyable eating occasion.

Qualitative research

The second research project took the form of eight 90-minute focus groups, each with eight consumers who only rarely or occasionally buy pork for home consumption. The objectives of this project were:

- To understand usage and attitudes towards pork amongst infrequent pork consumers.
- To determine why these consumers only buy pork infrequently and what encourages them to buy more.
- To gauge consumer reaction to the relationship between health, the environment and meat production.

- attitude

Meat-eating remains remarkably robust despite animal health scares, sections of the health lobby advocating the eating of less meat and lifestyle changes that have led consumers to spend less time cooking. Even occasional meat eaters acknowledge that meat is part of a healthy, balanced diet and there is a high level of enjoyment. They are, however, becoming much more discerning and for many, the focus is on the quality of meat rather than quantity or even price.

For example, most consumers are not motivated solely by the fact meat might be organic. Many would prefer to buy premium tier products that are seen to deliver a difference and worth paying extra for. The importance of quality standard marks is universally acknowledged, as consumers believe they help maintain quality and consistency and provide reassurance and confidence.

For most consumers, a recognised 'British' logo on pack is sufficient reassurance on quality. Consumers want to know where their meat comes from. Buying British is also seen as supporting the economy and the farming industry. Buying local appeals because the meat is perceived as fresher and therefore of better quality. Consumers regard pork more as a 'local' product and do not associate it with any of the health scares associated with other meats. Pork is regarded as a 'natural' product.

Media coverage on animal husbandry issues does register with consumers. They do not necessarily want the details, but they do support good welfare practices, which they believe translate to superior quality. Outdoor rearing of pigs is seen as being more natural and humane and consumers believe it produces better quality and taste in pork.

Even for the most discerning consumers, the promotion of breed or feed of pigs has little relevance. However, they can be motivated when this information is translated into the effects on quality and the eating experience.

- image

The research among occasional pork users threw up some very interesting perceptions and comparisons on the values associated with pork and the other meats. Consumers were asked to indicate which meat they associated with 30 different attributes. Most of the positive attributes were captured by beef, lamb and poultry. Amongst these light users of pork the perceptions of pork do not compare well with those of other meats.

How consumers place product values

Beef	Pork	Lamb	Chicken
Quality	Local	Entertaining	Additives & preservatives
Traditional	Unhealthy	Flavoursome	Hormones
Lean	Tasteless	Tender	Family
Treat	Boring	Succulent	Value for money
	Not versatile	Imported	Natural
	Tough	Expensive	Organic
	Dry	Fatty	Everyday
	Time consuming		Quick
	Bland		Versatile
			Fresh

Yet other aspects of the research showed that there is a disconnect between perception and reality. For many, pork seems still to be locked in a former image: it may well be out-dated, but the message still is not getting across, especially to light users.

- serving pork for a change

When consumers talk about pork, they envisage joints, loins or chops and usually in a traditional serving of meat and two vegetables. For some consumers, there is no connection between fresh pork and products such as bacon, sausages, ham and gammon. These products have a distinct and different texture, flavour and appearance from fresh pork and are obviously used in different meals and eating occasions.

Pork is not considered part of the usual meal repertoire by occasional users who tend to buy it as a change and to avoid the meal fatigue of the same weekly repertoire. Price and promotional activity, highlighting pork's comparative value for money, often prompts a purchase.

There is good reason to be optimistic that pork sales can increase. Light consumers acknowledge that availability is good and that quality tiering ensures there is an option for everyone. Pork quality is on a par with other meats and for most, fat is no longer an issue. For some occasional users, however, pork is still seen as somewhat old-fashioned and a cheaper cut of meat that has not kept pace with the needs of modern consumers and lifestyles. There is a tendency for consumers to prepare pork in the same way they have always done and they claim not to be getting ideas and information that educate and inspire them to try something new and different.

Conclusion

Consumers are in general increasingly more knowledgeable about food than they were in the past but they are also increasingly cynical - or at least questioning - about claims made. Research clearly indicates that pork is acknowledged by light users to be a natural product and it is therefore worth communicating the credible claim of pork's natural product values. Light users would be impressed to know that British pork is hormone and additive free. Such a message would provide the confidence and reassurance needed to drive consumer preference over imported products that are not produced to the same welfare and quality standard followed by British producers. As with regular purchasers of pork, light users are also not sufficiently aware of the extent to which British pork is outdoor reared. There is real merit in getting this message across to consumers. The benefits of breed need to be carefully explained if they are to be communicated effectively.

Among infrequent consumers of pork there is a residual perception that it is an old-fashioned meat. Yet there are real indications that these consumers can be turned round and convinced of the merits of pork. There is no doubt that pork can satisfy modern attitudes, tastes and requirements – it is more the case that the right kind of motivating information is not getting through to consumers, particularly occasional users. This is worth pursuing because consumers insist they want variety in their diet. However, the research also shows that they are not very adventurous when it comes to preparing pork. Consumers do acknowledge that pork can play a role alongside other meats and, given how versatile it is, this presents the industry with a major opportunity to promote the wide range of dishes for which pork is suited.