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Portion perfect, portion practical

Pre-portioned beef enables chefs to focus on creativity, employees.

Most chefs learn to portion beef as a part of culinary school classes or real-world training. For many, it's a daily duty they enjoy for its unhurried pace and the challenge of cutting meat accurately.

But to err is human, and errors occur when chefs are rushed, multitasking or directing staffers. Badly cut steaks are costly mistakes that add up to real dollars over time, and when cuts like beef tenderloin cost \$12 and more per pound wholesale, it's easy to see how mistakes of a half-ounce here or an ounce there add up to a food-cost problem.

One answer is to purchase pre-portioned beef, steaks cut to spec and delivered in individual, vacuum-sealed packages. It's a solution that can save on both waste due to haste as well as labor. Many restaurants know that while they may spend a bit more for accurate beef cuts, it will free up their chefs' time for other jobs like menu development and employee training.

Getting some chefs to sign on is not always easy, says Robert George, director of business development for National Beef Packing Co. and its sales subsidiary, Kansas City Steaks. "They've been cutting their own steaks for years and take pride in the job they do."

But the reality is professionals who cut meat for a living do it to a higher degree of accuracy than chefs whose job descriptions entail many duties away from the cutting table. In addition, George says, "I try to help them see the advantage of having more time to operate a business by not cutting steaks themselves. I help them see how it's costing them more — in time and money — to do the cutting themselves."

A HIGH-TECH TOUCH

Skilled as its meat cutters are, National Beef also employs machines such as laser-guided "vision slicers" to cut super-precise portions, George says. The machine weighs and measures the size of each large cut of meat and calculates how to portion it precisely to customers' specs programmed into the machine's computer. The machine takes a picture of the meat and then, based on target weights, cuts portions using computer-guided blades.



“If it’s looking at a whole ribeye and the customer wants 12-ounce steaks, it will determine how best to cut it” by maximizing the whole muscle, George says. If a portion of the muscle will fall short of that 12-ounce spec, the machine will automatically cut it for the next closest spec, such as 10 ounces or 8 ounces. “It cuts using a series of blades that adjust to make the exact cuts.”

BETTER INVENTORY AND COST MANAGEMENT

Even chefs who are skilled meat cutters risk product degradation when cutting in bulk. For example, breaking down several whole ribeyes at once to get ahead for the next few days will expose the meat to air, cause oxidization and trigger browning. To eliminate oxidization, National Beef vacuum-seals each portion just after it exits the slicer. Without air, the meat retains its fresh, red hue.

“Even if a chef cuts meat that morning, by the time the evening shift comes, you’ll see some browning,” he says. “Vacuum sealing extends the shelf life of a steak to at least 21 days, even 28 days if necessary. When the steak is ordered, you’re only opening the package for what you need, when you need it.”

Individual packaging of exact-weight cuts also simplifies inventory. A chef could count each steak by hand or weigh the case and its contents to get a tally.

TARGETING NEEDS MORE EFFICIENTLY

Ordering pre-portioned also allows chefs to better target needs without spending more cash than necessary on meat orders.

“Bringing in a whole case of uncut tenderloins could cost \$750 or more, depending on the time of year,” George says. “Instead, the chef could order one or two cases of cut steaks and spend \$200 to \$400 dollars, get the exact amount needed and know the whole time how many portions there are in house.”

Buying from a beef harvester like National Beef Packing, he adds, provides chefs with the shortest supply line possible and the best prices available. “That’s an advantage the guys in the middle don’t have,” he says, referring to third-party meat suppliers. “As the harvester, we’ve got a direct line to the meat.”

SPOT CHECKS FOR QUALITY

George knows and respects chefs who weigh each cut steak to ensure they’re getting what they paid for, and he says National Beef often performs similar field audits for customers.

“We’ll pull out boxed product and check weights and specs ourselves,” he says. “That’s the service we provide — steaks cut exactly the way our restaurant customers want them.”