

Go whole hog for local

PG Webcast panelists detailed how connecting consumers to the places and faces behind their products has helped them move high-profit premium pork.

By Meg Major

The “locally grown” label is here to stay—and fits the niche segment of the pork category quite well, according to retailers and suppliers who’ve had success with the segment.

Consumers are placing a higher value on being able to connect a product to a face and/or a place, confirmed the quartet of panelists, consisting of Sharon Young, co-owner/v.p. of three-unit McGinnis Sisters Special Food Stores; McGinnis Sisters’ director of meat and seafood, Carl Pursh; pork producer Tim Beeler, president of Beelers Pure Pork; and Jarrod Sutton, director of retail marketing for the National Pork Board. (National Pork Board also sponsored the Webcast.)

Pittsburgh-based McGinnis Sisters has a six-decade history of forging close alliances with family farmers and home-state producers, said Young, as part of a larger commitment to sourcing wholesome products that also support the local business community and the environment.

“We’ve always promoted local as a key part of our brand,” noted Young, “but about four years ago, we started speaking out loudly about it, and making it an integral part of our brand, and it’s really helped segregate us from our competitors.”

A buy-fresh/buy-local mentality is a vibrant “part of our next-generation training program,” added Young.

McGinnis Sisters meat director Carl Pursh, who works with several Pennsylvania-based farmers, said as a retailer he’s seen more consumers focusing on the environment, and thus becoming more interested in issues such as product source transparency and traceability, as well as producer size and practices. “Consumers nowadays want to know where it came from, what it was fed, how it was raised, and [whether] you have a relationship with the farmers. We get out in front, by giving customers the information that they’re looking for,” he explained.

Pursh said these shoppers see the added value and quality inherent in local premium pork, and

will “spend a little bit more for the niche products.”

According to Pursh, McGinnis Sisters takes “the extra step” of carrying a full array of value-added, oven-ready pork products, backed by ample sampling and abundant easy-prep information. “When they are spending a little bit more for the product, they feel a little bit better knowing that when they take it home, they will know exactly what to do with it.”

And that’s just as it should be with premium-positioned pork, noted NPB’s Jarrod Sutton, who



Carl Pursh, McGinnis Sisters Special Food Stores’ director of meat and seafood, works with a variety of local farmers.

contributed to the discussion the Des Moines, Iowa-based board’s latest Pork Checkoff research.

Niche food buyers generally will seek out their favorite products across a range of sources. About two-thirds (63 percent) of consumers typically buy products at a conventional grocery store, while about half (53 percent) buy them at a farmers’ market or food co-op, explained Sutton, noting that another 37 percent buy directly from local farmers, and a third (33 percent) purchase them at a specialty food store.

Mark of distinction

More than half (53 percent) of niche pork buyers, meanwhile, buy that product at a conventional grocery store, while one-third (33 percent) purchase niche pork at specialty food stores. Twenty-three percent of niche pork purchasers do so at a

farmers’ market or food co-op, and 20 percent buy directly from a local farmer.

Sutton said niche fresh or frozen pork is on the grocery lists of niche food buyers about 16 times a year. By comparison, purchasers of niche fruits and vegetables buy those products on average 37 times a year.

Twenty-five percent of respondents cited healthfulness as the most important reason for buying niche pork; other “most important” reasons included quality (cited by 14 percent), and flavor or taste (14 percent). Overall, noted Sutton, more than half of respondents cited quality, flavor or taste, freshness, and healthfulness as most important.

Besides addressing consumer demand for more readily accessible information on fresh meat products, the recent mandatory country-of-origin labeling requirements further up the ante for retailers and their supplier counterparts to provide crisp, clear, on-pack intelligence about how and where food products are produced.

That’s music to the ears of Webcast panelist and fifth-generation farmer Tim Beeler, president of Le Mars, Iowa-based Beeler’s Pure Pork. “We have seen a tremendous rush from retailers trying to differentiate themselves from the other stores down the street,” said Beeler.

“They’re seeking something different and/or better than their competitor doesn’t offer.”

From the pork perspective, observed Beeler, “different/better” generally applies to process-verified, antibiotic-free, Berkshire-bred, organic, and locally raised livestock.

He added that the operative words in a locally sourced pork discussion are “who and how?” rather than “where?”

“We sell a lot of pork on the West Coast, and my wife, daughter, and I spend almost every weekend in stores getting to know consumers,” said Beeler. “And when we’re asked if we’re local, I tell them I’m from Iowa. But that doesn’t bother them so much,” especially after having an opportunity to learn first-hand about how Beeler raises and treats his animals. “And that is very, very important to them.” ■