

Falling meat prices help feed appetite for jerky

BY THEOPOLIS WATERS
REUTERS

CHICAGO — With prices for U.S. livestock on the decline because of larger cattle and hog herds, meat processors are jumping on the jerky bandwagon.

In recent years, dried-meat snacks have gained popularity as Americans embrace diets packed with protein and less sugar and fat. Jerky has overcome its image as a highly salted pseudo-food found at gas stations and convenience stores.

Meat-snack makers have toned down the fat and salt and now tout the product's perceived health benefits, analysts said.

"It's one of those things

where people think it has a health halo around it," said Darren Seifer, analyst at market research firm NPD Group.

Purveyors of upscale jerky have gotten in on the act, including chocolate maker Hershey Co., which acquired premium beef jerky maker Krave Pure Foods early last year.

U.S. per-capita consumption of meat snacks has risen 14 percent since 2012, far outpacing the growth of other savory snacks, according to NPD Group. U.S. jerky sales totaled \$1.5 billion for the 52 weeks ended Aug. 7, market research firm IRI said.

Tyson Foods, ConAgra Foods — owner of the Slim Jim brand — and other meat

producers seek to piggyback on jerky's popularity to find new customers and markets for soaring supplies of cheaper beef, pork and poultry.

"The cost of raw materials has decreased versus prices a few years ago, resulting in lower average prices for jerky," said Jeff Caswell, general manager of Tyson-owned Hillshire Farm and Ball Park Brands.

U.S. meat producers have grappled with lower prices for several months. For the week ending Sept. 3, choice wholesale beef averaged \$195.67 per hundredweight (cwt), down 26 percent from its record high in May 2015. Pork averaged \$77.71 per cwt, a 43 percent drop from the all-time high of July

2014, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"This decrease is bringing consumers back to the category, while also attracting new consumers who may not have previously been jerky purchasers," said Caswell.

Jerky products are available at grocery chains including Wal-Mart Stores, Costco Wholesale and Whole Foods Market. A bag of meat jerky averaging about 2.5 ounces can range in price from around \$4 to more than \$8 for premium products.

While beef is the most popular meat protein for making jerky, pork and turkey are gaining popularity, along with such exotic meats as bison, kangaroo,

salmon and even earthworms.

Marketing of jerky products has surged. Hershey's KRAVE brand featured U.S. Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps in a recent campaign.

Price has also been a factor, as meat supplies surge and push costs for producers lower.

The size of the U.S. cattle herd has returned to a five-year high after falling to a 63-year low in 2014 following several years of drought in parts of the country.

The hog population hit a record high last year as the industry climbed back from the porcine epidemic diarrhea virus, which erupted in May 2013 and killed millions of pigs.

"Right now is much more

financially attractive and I think that's why we're seeing so many new brands," said Adam Beane, ConAgra's meat snacks senior brand manager.

In addition to companies offering niche jerky products, such as pairing nuts with dried meat, larger producers also are branching out.

KRAVE has introduced a bar featuring dried fruit and quinoa with either turkey, beef or pork jerky.

Even Slim Jim is looking at add-ons, but not at the expense of its lucrative meat sticks line.

"I do think there are some really interesting entries there and I'd be lying to you if I said we haven't done some testing," said Beane.

Flour

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Chhabra said Bouchard's buckwheat is the only flour — and one of the few foods — he's never had an allergic reaction to.

"I have no idea what the Bouchard family does — or does not do — with their buckwheat that makes me never react to it," he said. "But I am extremely thankful for it."

What the family does, according to Janice Bouchard, is take special care to assure the naturally — and now certified — gluten-free grain stays that way from field to mill to storage and packaging.

"We have our own mill and only mill our own buckwheat in there," Bouchard said. "It's right here on the farm, and we do not allow any wheat, oats or other grains in that building at all so there is never a chance of cross-contamination."

The Bouchards don't mill their entire fall harvest at once, choosing instead to mill small batches as orders come in to preserve as much of the grain's fresh taste as possible.

Chhabra discovered the Bouchards in 2013 and has been getting regular shipments from the the farm ever since, first by way of his cousin who lives in the U.S. but more recently directly from the farm.



JULIA BAYLY | BDN

With more and more people looking for gluten-free options in cooking and baking, buckwheat from Bouchard Family Farms in Fort Kent is meeting a growing food niche.

"I send out six 3-pound bags about once a month," Janice Bouchard said this week as she finished packing up an order for Chhabra. "I have to double bag it in plastic bags because it is going on a long trip."

For Chhabra, all that extra effort the Bouchards take to raise their buckwheat means a grain that is not only safe to eat but one that he enjoys.

"For me, [Bouchard's buckwheat] had just the right nuttiness and the perfect combination of flavor and texture [and] their flour has a distinctive freshness to it, lacking in other flours I tried," he said. "But I would be dishonest if I said that I keep on getting it be-

cause of its deliciousness [because] with the Indian currency being very weak compared to the U.S. dollar and the high rates of international shipping, it becomes simply too expensive for an Indian to afford just for the taste."

It costs about \$100 to ship the buckwheat to India, or about 6,600 Indian Rupees.

Chhabra uses the buckwheat to prepare traditional recipes, including the Indian flatbreads Roti and Chapati.

"While generally roti is made by using a small amount of water to wheat flour and kneading the dough," he said. "We add mashed potatoes instead of water to the buckwheat

flour so that the starch in the potatoes provides the necessary binding."

The buckwheat also works well for making Poora — the Indian version of ployes — along with pakoras, which is vegetables dipped in batter and fried in oil.

"Did I mention how much my 4-year-old daughter loves the buckwheat roti?" Chhabra said. "Not only does she like it way more than the wheat-flour roti, my little picky eater relishes it even more than her candies and chocolates."

The Bouchards plant and harvest around 200 acres in buckwheat annually and are perhaps best known for the packages of ploye mix — the

traditional Acadian flatbread made of buckwheat and white flour with just the right amount of baking powder to make it light and airy. The prepared mix makes preparing the pancake-like bread a snap for those not brought up on secret family ploye recipes.

"The ploye mix used to be 80 percent of our business and selling straight buckwheat flour the other 20 percent," Bouchard said. "But in the last couple of years, that has really flip-flopped with more and more people being told to stay away from gluten."

They sell the buckwheat and ploye mix throughout New England in Hannaford grocery stores and in specialty food shops. The family also sells the grain online and regularly ships it out to customers around the country.

Recipes using buckwheat in general — and Bouchard's grains in particular — are starting to pop up in cookbooks in the states, including "Against the Grain," by Nancy Cain and published by Clarkson Potter.

"We are getting more inquiries all the time for our buckwheat thanks to the cookbooks and more people looking for healthy alternatives to wheat," Bouchard said. "We have enough [grain] storage here on the farm to store buckwheat for five years, [but] that does not seem to be something we need to do."

Cobbler

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And even the cobbler is a little funny if you stop to appreciate the name for a moment. Beyond the desserts covered with a thick crust, cobblers are folks who repair shoes. Dessert or shoes — both are good.

This particular recipe for apple cobbler begins with fresh apples, which are plentiful in pick-your-own orchards and at farmers markets right now. I used what I had in our fruit bowl, which included some early girls and another tart apple I found at the farmers market. Because these bold apples aren't too sweet, rich brown sugar counters the tartness and a gentle mix of cinnamon and nutmeg enhance the flavor.

As for the topping, I used my favorite recipe for baking powder biscuits and adapted it a bit with a touch of sugar and a hint of cinnamon.

The resulting dessert tender and sweet, with hints of savoriness. And it's an absolute delight served warm with a scoop of cold vanilla ice cream.

Sarah Walker Caron is the senior features editor for the Bangor Daily News and author of "Grains as Mains: Modern Recipes Using Ancient Grains," available at bookstores everywhere including The Briar Patch and Bull Moose in Bangor. For more delicious recipes, check out Maine Course at mainecourse.bangordailynews.com.

TALES BEING TOLD

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Cuban

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garlic, seared meats and citrus pervades the cafe, from when Jennice arrives early in the morning to begin cooking, to when the last scraps of roast pork are put on the plate.

"We tell people that it's home cooking. It's all family recipes. It's very traditional," Rodriguez said. "And for people that don't know Cuban food, I would say that it is spicy but not hot."

Cuban sandwiches have gone mainstream in the past few years — the irresistible combination of ham, pork, cheese, pickles and mustard grilled on white bread can be found in restaurants nationwide — but other Cuban dishes are likely less well-known among Bangor's dining population. Cuban cuisine



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

A Cuban sandwich is ready food for a customer at the Cubita Libre Cafeteria on Monday.

blends Spanish, African and Caribbean influences into a flavorful, hearty style of food that's distinct from other Latin or Caribbean cuisines.

There are four main dishes on the menu, including Ropa Vieja, one of the oldest known Cuban dishes, consisting of beef, stewed with peppers and onions and then

shredded. There's also Boliche, a stuffed beef roast served with potatoes; Picadillo a la Habanero, ground beef cooked with raisins, potatoes and vegetables; and Pollo al Caldero, Cuban-style roasted chicken.

There also are ever-changing specials on the menu that vary with seasonal availability of ingre-

dients. Marinated, grilled pork chops sometimes appear, as does red bean soup, empanadas and sweet, creamy, Cuban-style flan.

There are plenty of sides, too, like fried plantains, yucca root with garlic and onion, or red beans and rice. And for coffee lovers, Cubita Libre offers Cuban coffee — sweet, strong and served with or without milk (con leche or sin leche, respectively). Cuba is one of the world's great coffee cultures. Whether they are in Havana or are part of the

large Cuban community in Florida, Cubans get together to drink many cups of the dark, sweet beverage throughout the day.

"It's a really good time to get into Cuban food," Fred Rodriguez said. "I hope people are even more interested in it now that we're open here."

Cubita Libre Cafeteria is open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Saturday, for eat-in or takeout. It is located at 661 Hogan Road in Bangor. For more information, call 573-1971 or "like" them on Facebook.

Roasted, Herbed Cherry Tomatoes

- 1 quart cherry tomatoes, halved
 - Fresh or dried basil, oregano, and/or rosemary
 - Freshly minced garlic
 - Salt and pepper
 - Olive oil
- Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.
- Line a cookie or baking sheet with parchment paper.
- Lay the cut tomatoes close-

- ly together with the cut side up on the sheet.
- Sprinkle the herbs and garlic and salt and pepper over the tomatoes.
- Dribble olive oil over the tomatoes.
- Bake for about 45 minutes.
- Eat right away or store in an airtight container in the fridge, bringing them to room temperature before eating them.

ments. Include name, address and daytime phone number. And make sure to check out her blog at tastebuds.bangordailynews.com.

Oliver

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ner ones tend to warp at higher temperatures."

Gina recommended basil, oregano, and/or rosemary, fresh or dried, in addition to garlic to season the tomatoes. I chose basil along with coarse pickling salt and pepper. I served them on French bread rounds with grated fresh Parmesan over them. They just vanished off the plate. They'd

be wonderful tossed with pasta, or added to a salad. I want to try them tossed with green beans.

So now, back out to the plants and the struggle to resist eating them on the spot.

Send queries or answers to Sandy Oliver, 1061 Main Road, Islesboro 04848. Email sandyoliver47@gmail.com. For recipes, tell us where they came from. List ingredients, specify number of servings and do not abbreviate measure-

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