

REPORT

LOCAL SUSSEX MEAT

Where to find it and how to buy it.

Produced by
**Food & Health Partnership East Sussex &
The Netherfield Centre for Sustainable
Food and Farming**



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LOCAL MEAT DISTRIBUTION IN EAST SUSSEX

Introduction

The aim of this report is to assist public sector institutions, such as schools, hospitals and residential homes, and private sector businesses that source meat at wholesale level to be able to source local meat and to understand the issues around sourcing local meat.

Methodology

Over 100 wholesalers, meat processors, butchers, farm shops and abattoirs were interviewed by phone or in person. Those questioned were restricted to suppliers in East Sussex, although some specialists outside the county were contacted.

Views were also sought from the principle stakeholders in the East Sussex meat industry. These included SEEDA, Sussex Enterprise, the Sussex Producers Consortium, Government Office for the South East, Food Standards Agency, South East Primestock Producers, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Action in Rural Sussex (AIRS), and Meat and Livestock Commission (MLC).

Why Buy Local?

For Better Quality Meat

Quality is governed by factors such as production methods, selection of the best animals, and the length of time that the meat is hung before being cut and packaged. Peoples idea of quality can cover a range of indicators including taste and tenderness (which can be influenced by breed and how long the meat has been hung for), fat cover (some people prefer lean meat and others choose meat with a good fat covering) nutritional health benefits, animal welfare factors, and whether the meat was produced in an environmentally sensitive way.

Nearly two thirds of East Sussex is designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and covers the unique landscapes of the South Downs and High Weald. Most farms are small or medium sized and on grade 3 listed land that is best suited to rearing cattle and sheep. Many farms rear suckler beef herds and sheep on the Downs or Weald pastures. Cattle and sheep reared in this way on their mothers milk and grazed primarily on grass, produce a particular quality of meat that is rich in omega-3s, essential fatty acids that are important in children's and adults health. These low intensive farming systems also very often help to maintain natural biodiversity and the historic landscapes characteristic of the county.

Increasingly, farms are returning to traditional breeds such as the rich red-brown Sussex cattle, Romney sheep and native breeds of pigs including the Gloucester Old Spot,

Tamworth and Middle White, because they are suited to the farming systems and soil types. These breeds have their own special flavours and fat cover and are increasing in popularity with butchers and customers alike.

For Environmental And Animal Welfare Benefits

Animals that are born, reared and slaughtered in the same area are likely to experience less stress in their lives. Imported meat and animals sold into the multiple retail system has often travelled many hundreds of miles first to abattoirs and then on to centralised packaging and distribution systems around the country.

Animals transported long distances can experience high levels of stress, which can also affect the quality of the meat. The distance food travels is known as *food miles* and makes a significant contribution to road pollution and congestion

Many local, traditional farming systems rearing grass-fed beef, sheep and pigs that are sold into local markets are helping to maintain the unique landscape and important habitats of rural East Sussex, reduce food miles, and reduce the cruelty of long distance live animal transport.

Economic & Marketing Benefits

Government advice to public agencies draws attention to the evidence that local sourcing contributes to the regeneration of rural economies. A recent New Economics Foundation study has tracked money spent by local authorities and found that local procurement is a very cost effective way to meet regeneration targets.

There is also the benefit of public perception. Although difficult to quantify many people may prefer to see their money 'staying in the local area' and would rather eat local meat. For private sector buyers this could provide a marketing opportunity giving a competitive advantage. A public opinion poll commissioned by the MLC showed that increasing numbers of restaurant customers want to know the origin of the meat they are eating and would like to see labels on the menus. In response to this survey the MLC has produced a draft set of Best Practise Guidelines to help caterers label meat origin.

Supplier Benefits

Government research indicates that using smaller suppliers, which local producers will inevitably be, can be beneficial to the purchasing company. In its publication 'Smaller supplier ...better value?' the Office of Government Commerce found that innovation, responsiveness and flexibility are three key advantages.

Smaller suppliers tend to be able to innovate and respond to buyers' changing requirements much more quickly than a single large supplier. They are likely to have the flexibility to allow them to meet the buyer's specific needs. For example, special dietary requirements or to change product if a pre-planned menu proves unpopular. Being a large customer of a small supplier also means your business is important to them. This can result in more personal levels of service and the shorter management chain can mean a more rapid response to any queries or problems.

Provenance – What Is ‘Local Meat’?

One of the key issues that should be addressed before anyone makes the decision to buy local meat is what exactly is ‘local meat’. There is no cast-in-stone legal definition of local meat. The final decision will always rest with the buyer and that decision will be made using a range of parameters.

Geography

The Government defines local food as “food produced within a limited geographical radius but which does not necessarily have any distinctive quality”. No indication or guidance is given as to the size of the “geographical radius”. A village restaurant or residential home may be able to source directly from one or two nearby farms. A larger institution may need to widen the net to Sussex or even the South East in order to ensure an adequate and regular supply.

Where an animal has lived most of its life

Farming is a diverse industry with some farmers breeding, raising and finishing their animals entirely on their own farm. The only time an animal might leave the farm would be to go to slaughter. However, there is a very large sector of the industry that buys and finishes young surplus stock from farmers unable, for economic or logistical reasons, to finish them. These are known as store animals. The store animal may have been born outside of the local area but still spent a major part of its life locally.

Alternatively, meat described as local, could have come from livestock that has spent only a few weeks in the local area. For example, until recently, Scotch Beef described beef from cattle kept in Scotland for as little as 10% of their life. The other 90% could have been spent in a country unknown to the buyer of the meat. Loss of customer confidence in the product has brought a change in the rules and Scotch Beef must now come from animals born, reared and slaughtered in Scotland. The Food Standards Agency is currently considering whether there is a need for a definition of local food, which may become legally binding in the same way terms as Free Range or Organic have.

Traceability

How can customers be sure that the meat they are buying is what it purports to be?

The Normal Chain Of Events

An animal travels from the farm to an abattoir either directly or via a livestock market. The majority of animals will leave the abattoir in carcass form on route to retail butchers, wholesale or catering butchers, or back to the farm from where they came if that has its own cutting and storage facilities. Some however will leave in a cut form. For example, Forge Farm abattoir at Tunbridge Wells is licensed to cut carcasses into primal cuts but not into final cuts. Tottingworth abattoir near Heathfield has licensed facilities to allow it to carry out final butchering into individual joints and cuts. The issue to consider is how does the buyer know that their meat came from the locally reared animal that went into the abattoir?

Current legislation states that all cattle have to have an individual identity number, which they wear in the form of two ears tags. They must also be accompanied by a unique passport which travels with them from birth to death. Although not quite as comprehensive, sheep also require an ear tag that individually identifies each animal. Pigs require only a 'slap'/tattoo mark or a metal ear tag identifying the farm from where they came.

On arrival at the abattoir the animals are checked against the movement license and penned to ensure separation. Pigs are usually then given a tattoo mark with a number unique to that batch if not already marked, while sheep may receive a colour spray mark on their fleece. Once the animals enter the abattoir and have been killed any original identification is lost when the heads are removed, with the exception of the tattoos on pigs. Some abattoirs will apply a new label to the carcass while others simply rely on the order in which they are killed to identify each batch.

At this stage it is still fairly likely that each individual carcass can be traced back to the farm of origin. However the next stage is that of cutting and processing. It is here that the greatest risk comes of losing traceability. If whole carcasses are delivered from the abattoir direct to a small scale butcher it is likely that butcher will be able to continue the traceability right through to the customer. But if the carcass passes to a large-scale wholesaler receiving stock from several sources, who then in turn sells it to catering butchers, who then carry out the final processing - the chance of losing traceability rises rapidly. With the best intentions in the world it is not possible to identify a cut of meat back to an individual carcass.

Improvements To The System

There are some very good systems in place to reduce the likelihood of mis-labelling etc. For example, at Natural Farms, a wholesaler which sources much of its meat direct from the farm, a very tight record is kept of all the carcasses received and their final destination. A certificate is even issued to the receiving butcher stating where each carcass originated. This can in turn be displayed for the reassurance of his customers. Although ultimately a paper trail, it would stand up well to external auditing.

While good traceability systems do exist, they may not help in the sourcing of local meat. For example at Grampian Foods chicken processing plant near Uckfield a very thorough tracing system exists with all chicken portions sent out being batch coded. This will allow any box of chicken to be back traced to any individual processing day and therefore to producers who supplied the chickens. However, because each day chickens are accepted from several sources it is therefore not possible to identify the chicken to a single producer and therefore a single region.

Since 1st September 2000 the Beef Origin Labelling Scheme has ensured that all fresh or frozen beef offered for sale must be labelled with a code that links the meat back to the original animal or batch of animals. Furthermore, the label must state the country where the animal was born, raised and slaughtered along with details of the slaughterhouse and cutting plant. This information must be displayed on each piece of pre-packaged beef or, if sold loose, on a sign visible to the customer.

Shortening The Chain

The longer the processing and distribution chain the greater the chance of losing traceability. *The shortest chain* possible would be to buy direct from the farmer. Many farms in Sussex are now building their own cutting facilities and selling their meat direct. While it is still necessary for the animal to leave the farm to be slaughtered, if an abattoir with a good labelling system is used and the farm sells only its own meat or networks with a small number of neighbouring farms, the traceability chain is at its shortest and most robust.

A similar situation would arise if a butcher sourced his meat *from a single source*. There are a number of butchers in this directory who buy all their meat from only one or two farms. This greatly reduces the chance of the meat being mixed up with that from other sources, at the final processing and cutting stage. Good paperwork is also important. If a wholesaler such as Natural Farms is prepared to put its name on a *certificate of origin* (see appendix) then they are more likely to take traceability seriously. For larger buyers auditing would be an option including random visits to the wholesaler or abattoir, to follow the route of a particular batch of meat through the system.

From the 1st January 2005, EU regulation 178/202/EC on General Food Law will require traceability to be established at all stages of the food chain and the Food Standards Agency has developed guidelines on food traceability.

Price

Buying locally from small and medium producers often means losing economies of scale and therefore higher prices. The smaller scale producers may not have a regular supply of finished animals and need plenty of notice to ensure they have the right number of animals finished at the right time. They also need to sell all the cuts from any one animal.

For smaller-scale purchasers the increased costs are likely to be less significant and the benefits outweigh higher prices. Smaller buyers may also benefit from the advantages of working with more flexible or innovative suppliers.

The general industry feeling, expressed by individual butchers, wholesalers, producers, and the MLC, was that local meat would inevitably command a higher price. ADM, possibly the largest meat processor and wholesaler in the county, shifting over 3,000 tonnes of meat per month, said that while interested and capable of supplying large-scale contracts with local meat, its experience of such niche markets in the past has been that the need for a premium price has led to demand falling away after an initial period of enthusiasm.

One problem is that large-scale slaughter and processing facilities are either limited or non-existent in East Sussex. This means that a larger number of smaller batches of animals would be involved for any large-scale procurement. This in turn would result in

more administration. A wholesaler would rather deal with one or two large suppliers than have to negotiate with numerous small scale farmers. Understandably, this has been a disincentive to using several small local suppliers. This can be overcome by helping smaller producers to collaborate. Through collaboration and subcontracting, the buyer could help ensure that several small local producers join the supply chain.

The medium-sized wholesalers also expressed concern about supplying large contracts such as schools or health trusts because of the nature of the meat they would be buying. Unlike supplying a retail butcher who wants a full range of cuts, the institutional demand tends to be for the cheaper cuts and processed meat such as mince, dice and sausages. This could leave the wholesaler with an imbalance in the demand for product. If the better cuts then have to be sold at a reduced margin to clear, the wholesaler will want to see an increase in the price on the cheaper cuts.

Suppliers of Local Meat

The following directory includes suppliers of meat who have stated that they supply wholesale customers and do, or can, supply local meat. No definition of the term 'local' was agreed with the suppliers, as this would need to be agreed between buyer and supplier. Entries are listed in alphabetical order.

