Q 28: How Can We Package Fresh Meat?

A 28: Fresh meat—beef, veal, pork, and lamb—marketing has undergone some major changes. The small butcher has practically disappeared. Most meat is sold in the supermarket. However, the supermarkets have failed to modernize the butchering operation sufficiently to keep pace with advances in technology. Some claim that the high cost of meat is the consequence of this outdated processing and marketing technique.

In order to reduce, or preferably eliminate, the time and space consuming operation at the retail level, it is mandatory to impart longer shelf life to individual meat cuts offered to the consumer. Extending shelf life would open the door to regional or possibly even national distribution of retail meat portions.

In addition to reducing overhead, minimizing spoilage, and ensuring better quality control, since meats could then be checked and processed from a central source, it might even enable meat prices to stabilize at lower levels. Without question, improved packaging could transform the outmoded butcher shop operation into a modern, more profitable 21st Century retail meat section.

FRESH VERSUS FROZEN

With nearly every other type of foodstuff being retailed in a frozen state, it seems logical that meats could be sold frozen. However, many years of extensive test marketing have shown that the average consumer is not prepared to purchase quality frozen meat. While the consumer may purchase
fresh meat, take it home, and freeze it, this same buyer rejects the fresher quick-frozen meat at the butcher counter.

The question is, why? American consumers are most progressive. In the last 30 years, they have seen and readily accepted major innovations in food packaging. Consumers once upon a time bought fresh vegetables only. They now accept canned and frozen produce readily. In addition, they have eagerly accepted instant coffee along with countless precooked, dehydrated, freeze-dried, and other ready-to-serve products and have even shown a willingness to pay a premium for them.

The consumer's rejection of frozen meats obviously complicated matters for the distributor as well as the packager. In a frozen state, meat could be stored for many months and shipped over long distances, making central meat packing an easily attained reality. Bloom, the bright red color of the meat, could be retained throughout storage in a properly selected packaging material. All this has been available for sometime (see Bivac below), but the public must be educated to accept this packaging concept.

A misconception of the consumer is the belief that "red meat is fresh meat," requiring present and future distribution systems to deliver red meat in full bloom to the consumer. Even institutional buyers require this color conformance.

NEWER PACKAGING METHODS

One of the innovations of the 1960s and 1970s was the "subprimal" package. This method involves the packaging of larger section of the carcass in larger plastic pouches. This method provides a partial vacuum to prolong storage life. Although this type of packaging does not retard enzymatic aging, it does offer several advantages, among them permitting shipment of meats from a central source.

It also has several major drawbacks, since additional operations at the retail level reduce the meat's potential shelf life, increase the product's cost, place an additional burden on packaging personnel, require handling space in the cutting area and prevent maximum utilization of trim and bones.

Bivac

This system, developed in the late 1970s by Bill Young and financed by E. I. Dupont, was designed to package retail cuts on a relatively inexpensive machine, between two layers of ionomer. The film provided strength and enough oxygen permeability to retain the bloom. The package was designed to sell fresh frozen meat. But it could be utilized for fresh sale as well. At refrigerated temperatures, the ionomer would reduce the need for refacing