

Where's the Beef?

By Reg P. Wydeven
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As I point out in many articles, I'm very blessed. I have a gorgeous and sweet wife, a beautiful and kind daughter, and a funny and adorable son. We're lucky that both our children are pretty smart. Because my son is a boy, however, he is prone to do some dumb stuff.

For example, in September we had to rush to the emergency room after he swallowed a quarter. Thankfully, our dear surgeon friend, Dr. Pete, was able to remove it. Although I was worried sick, I really couldn't come down on him too hard. After all, I am also a boy and may have consumed some things during my lifetime that I'm not proud of.

For example, in high school, I ate three 'Snausages' doggy treats for \$10. My buddy, Pearl, upped the stakes at a high school reunion when for \$20 he ate a concoction consisting of beer, Pepsi, crushed Oreo cookies, cheese and summer sausage. Borrowing a line from the Sylvester Stallone blockbuster, 'First Blood,' Pearl "can eat things that would make a billy goat puke."

Despite his intestinal fortitude, I'm not sure if even Pearl would eat the substance commonly known as "pink slime."

The unappetizing moniker describes what food industry insiders call "lean finely textured beef." Pink slime is a low-cost ingredient made by South Dakota-based Beef Products Inc. from fatty leftover meat trimmings and other cuts. These scraps are then heated to about 100° F, quickly spun to remove excess fat, and finally compressed into blocks to be mixed with ground beef. The substance is treated with "a puff of ammonium hydroxide gas" to kill bacteria such as E. coli and salmonella.

Pink slime became red-hot after an Internet campaign to prevent it from being served in schools spread like wildfire. Bettina Elias Siegel, known for her popular blog 'The Lunch Tray,' started an online petition, which currently has over 225,000 signatures, asking the U.S. Department of Agriculture to stop using pink slime in schools.

The USDA has responded. The agency recently announced that starting this fall, schools enrolled in the national school lunch program will have the choice not to use pink slime. Schools will have the ability to choose between beef that is 95% lean but contains pink slime or less lean beef that has no pink slime. Changes can't take place immediately because of some schools' contractual obligations.

This year, the USDA has contracted to buy 111.5 million pounds of ground beef for the National School Lunch Program. Of this amount, about 7 million pounds is from Beef Products Inc., however, a single serving of ground beef will never contain more than 15% pink slime. Since the byproduct is ground into the beef, though, a consumer cannot eat around it.

The USDA insists that pink slime meets its high standards for food safety. Beef Product Inc. strongly agrees, insisting its product is 100 percent lean beef and is approved by a series of industry experts. The company even started a website, pinkslimeisamyth.com, which debunks rumors about the product.

The National Meat Association also has a beef with critics of pink slime. The organization disputed claims that the byproduct is made from "scraps destined for pet food" and assures consumers that ammonium hydroxide is perfectly safe and is used in baked goods, puddings and other processed foods.

I'm pretty sure I would eat beef containing pink slime. After all, meat contains nutrients, such as iron. Then again, so do quarters.

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