

U.S. Beef Gaining in Popularity with Japanese Consumers

While access for U.S. beef remains limited in Japan, consumers in the former No. 1 export market are more ready than anytime in recent years to chow down on American steaks and beef bowls, according to surveys conducted by USMEF.

Over the past three years, the number of consumers who feel “extremely safe” or “somewhat safe” in consuming U.S. beef have more than doubled from 12.1 percent in 2006 to 30.1 percent in August 2009, according to surveys commissioned by USMEF and conducted by Macromill. Those consumers who feel “not very safe” or “not safe at all” have declined from 62.5 percent to 30.8 percent, while the balance have no firm opinion.

“The message of the quality, safety and wholesomeness of U.S. beef is resonating with Japanese consumers,” said Takemichi Yamashoji, USMEF-Japan senior marketing director. “Our programs are geared toward reinforcing these positive perceptions among consumers and the trade, and the trend is very positive.”

The survey revealed that Japanese consumers look to certain outside information sources to reinforce their confidence in U.S. beef. When asked what would encourage them to buy U.S. beef, the survey participants cited several leading factors:

- 41 percent said the approval of the safety of U.S. beef by the Government of Japan
- 23.4 percent said U.S. Government safety guarantees
- 22.1 percent said safety approvals offered by specialists and celebrities
- 20.5 percent said safety explanations offered by U.S. producers
- 14.4 percent said the serving of U.S. beef in well-known restaurants and hotels

Yamashoji noted that USMEF’s programs are targeted toward addressing these areas. For example, through USMEF’s efforts, the historic four-star Hotel Okura in Tokyo recently returned U.S. beef to its restaurant menu. And in a special promotion with York Benimaru, USMEF developed a set of advertisements that featured photos of the retail chain’s meat buyer and his personal endorsement of U.S. beef to the customers of the chain’s 160 stores.

Last fall, USMEF-Japan hosted a scientific seminar addressing the risks of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in beef, led by a top global BSE expert, for an audience of more than 80 Japanese government officials, meat industry representatives, media and opinion leaders. A risk management expert stated that there is virtually no risk to Japanese consumers from BSE.

Last month, 100 Japanese families were selected from among 4,000 families that applied to participate in a USMEF barbecue hosted in Tokyo by four representatives from the Nebraska Soybean Board (NSB). The NSB delegation grilled steaks with the families, visited a Japanese cooking school and toured meat industry facilities in the country during their visit.

“Japanese consumers enjoy meeting the producers behind the products they serve their families,” said Yamashoji. “Talking with typical American meat and grain producers puts a face on U.S. beef and pork and reinforces the message of quality.”