

# Sheep industry

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Packers simply cannot afford to adjust slaughter rates to accommodate the highs and lows of seasonal lamb production. "If production were evenly distributed throughout 12 months, the packing industry could handle all we produce," he said.

The fact that sheep producers are sitting on a potential gold mine is evidenced by Rocco Enterprises' willingness to sink large amounts of capital into their current lamb venture, said Hubbard. The well-known Virginia-based turkey processor created a stir within the red meat industry last year by

announcing its intention to slaughter 10,000 lambs a week at its Rocco Further Processing facility located in Timberville.

Rocco's approach to insuring a year-round supply of lamb has been to insist on using ewes with year-round breeding potential in its contract agreements.

Whether or not Rocco's strategy will pay dividends remains to be seen, said Hubbard, adding that the future of the industry depends on producers' willingness to adopt progressive management strategies such as year-round lambing. At the present time,

however, American sheep producers aren't even good enough managers to compete with the price and availability of New Zealand lamb on their own turf. "We're no longer the most efficient producers of agricultural products in the world," Hubbard said.

The USDA official's overhaul of the industry includes new product development, a factor, he said, that has played a major role in the poultry industry's ability to claim an increasing percentage of consumers' food dollars. Here again, said Hubbard, the answer lies in the grower's willingness to increase his production efficiency and volume. "A variety of sheep products won't be developed until the supply of sheep meat is big enough to make it profitable," he said.

But increasing the supply of lamb doesn't mean increasing the size of the lamb, cautioned Eugene Gagliardi, the evening's second speaker. Gagliardi is best known as the inventor of the popular frozen meat product called "Steak-umms".

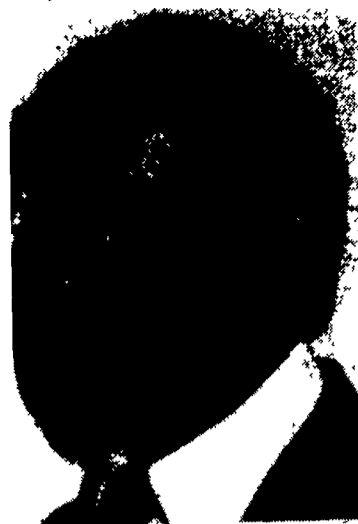
The owner of Southdown Meat Co. Inc., of West Chester, Gagliardi finally turned his creative muse loose on the lamb industry about three years ago. "I thought for years and years that lamb was being presented wrong," he said, noting that all that was needed to increase lamb's popularity was a more attractive and convenient array of lamb products.

After carving some 100 lamb carcasses, Gagliardi came up with nine lamb cuts (all patent-pending) that minimize carcass waste, and, he claims, provide more edible meat per ounce than any other cuts on the market. All cuts can be cooked in less than an hour and can easily be carved by the cook with a kitchen knife.

Gagliardi also guards against any strong, muttony taste by removing the thin white membrane, or fel, from the surface of the meat. Bones that stand in the way of easy carving are removed, and fat cover is limited to no more than one-eighth of an inch.

One of the factors traditionally limiting lamb's acceptance by consumers has been large cuts that result in mountains of leftovers. Gagliardi's secret to providing cuts of convenient size is to work with the smaller New Zealand lamb carcasses that top out at no more than 45 pounds. American lambs are simply too big, he says, pointing out that current showing trends are out of touch with the real world of meat production.

Gagliardi also encourages sales by printing appropriate lamb recipes on each individually



Dixon Hubbard

wrapped cut of lamb that bears his "Lamb Lovers Gourmet Cuts" label. "Ewe will love 'em," reads the logo.

Judging by public acceptance thus far, he just may be right. The U.S. Army has agreed to stock its commissaries from Maine to Virginia with Gourmet Cuts, and two Philadelphia-based chain stores have done likewise. "The reception has been phenomenal," says Gagliardi.



"Ewe will love 'em," says enterprising meat marketer Eugene Gagliardi of his patented lamb cuts. Pictured with the inventor of "Steak-umms" is one-half of a lamb prepared à la Gagliardi.

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