Va-based food distributor using DNA to track beef

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In this Thursday May 4, 2011 photo provided by IdentiGEN Ltd., a single-use DNA sampling device is used to capture DNA from a steak at IdentiGEN's lab in Lawrence, Kan. First came organic, then free-range, then local. Now discerning diners with a penchant for spending a premium to know where food comes from are pushing DNA-traceable meat onto restaurant menus. (AP Photo/IdentiGEN Ltd.)

First came organic, then free-range, then local. Now discerning diners with a penchant for spending a premium to know where food comes from are pushing DNA-traceable meat onto restaurant menus.

The technology - which allows meat to be traced from the farm to the fridge - has been used in Europe and other countries for decades, but has been slow to catch on in America.

But industry experts say being able to follow filet mignon, rib eye and other cuts of beef back to the ranch can pay off in multiple ways, including boosting consumer confidence, upping the value of a dinner, and cutting the time needed to track recalled meats.

"People want to know where their food is coming from and this gives you a perfect avenue for you to go ahead and find out," said Tracy Tonning, executive chef at Blackstone restaurant in Iowa City, Iowa. "You can trace it back to where it came from, where it was raised... It's a security factor for the guest, as well as the chef."

Tonning's restaurant is among more than 11,000 that Richmond-based food distributor Performance Food Group is supplying with DNA-traceable beef as an added value for customers of its premium Braveheart brand. The company, which has annual revenues of about $11 billion, said it is among the first distributors to use the technology.

"People are spending less in restaurants than they used to, but they are willing to spend more when they do go out to get something really special," said George Holm, CEO of the company that supplies food and other products to more than 130,000 restaurants and institutions, including schools, hotels and health care facilities.

Tests the company did in some steakhouses it supplies, as well as surveys outside other restaurants, showed consumers were willing to pay $2 or $3 more for the same cut meat if various "pleasers" were added - a higher quality of meat, traceability, as well as how the animals were treated and fed.

Of course, that value comes only if the customer knows about it. Which is why some restaurants are drawing diners' attention to the DNA-traceable meat through words and graphics on their menus, as well as having waiters educate customers at the table.

"Every restaurateur is going to want this," said Phil Lempert, a food marketing expert known as "The Supermarket Guru." Interest in local and organic food demonstrates that consumers in restaurants and grocery stores like products with a story, "as long as it's an authentic, true story," he said.

Products like DNA-traceable meat help the industry with safety concerns and is also "really good marketing."

"The awareness in general is, in my opinion, at the highest level it's ever been - from a health stand point, from a food safety standpoint," Lempert said. "We really need to rebuild confidence in our food and technologies like this help that."

The technology can determine not only where the meat came from, but also whether it's organic or Angus - or whatever the label says.

Workers take DNA samples at processing and other places along the supply chain. The samples are gathered to determine the specific animals each product came from. Information kept by farmers and others involved in the raising and processing of the animals can be added to give a more complete history.

DNA tracing also provides a faster way to identify the source of contaminated meat in the event of a recall, speeding the process from weeks or months to just hours. For example, it can identify the multiple animals whose parts were used in ground beef, which Holm said may be made from 1,000 different animals in a 10-pound box.

The technology's ability to pinpoint particular animals could even reduce the amount of meat affected by recalls, which generally are tremendously costly for producers, suppliers and others.

"In more recent years, food safety issues have become much more prominent in the supply chain here," said Ronan Loftus, co-founder of IdentiGEN Ltd., which is working with Performance Food Group on its DNA tracing. Countries like the United Kingdom and others turned to the technology because of food safety concerns, including worries about mad cow disease.

IdentiGEN, based in Ireland with U.S. offices in Lawrence, Kan., was founded by researchers from Trinity College in Dublin, who developed the process that assesses a panel of genetic markers using what's known as high-throughput DNA analysis.

It's becoming more important to tell consumers where and how their food is produced and DNA - what some call "nature's barcode" - helps do that, he said.

"How do we know our meat tastes better if we don't know where it comes from?" Loftus said. "By being able to have greater information and greater transparency within the chain that enables our customers to communicate more effectively on those issues."

Performance Food Group is able to do DNA tracing because it is using smaller suppliers dedicated to producing meat for the company. But challenges to take the technology mainstream in the U.S. include grappling with a much larger and more complex supply chain.

DNA-traceable meat also comes at a price at all levels of the supply chain - from the farmer to the customer's plate. But Loftus said those costs are coming down.

"It's an up-and-coming technology that will see a lot of use in our industry," said Mike E. John, a former president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and vice president of John Ranch Inc., a

family-owned cattle farm in Huntsville, Mo. "It is going to take some time to figure out how exactly the industry's going to use it and who's going to pay for it and what it's worth."