

BBC News - Could 'pink slime' be rebranded?

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By Brian Wheeler BBC News, Washington

Three out of the four US factories making "lean beef trimmings" are to be shut down following a public outcry. Is "pink slime" - as critics call it - finished or could it be relaunched under a new name?

The look on shoppers' faces as Jamie Oliver sloshed ammonia into a bowl of what he calls "pink slime" said it all.

They were horrified. They appeared to have no idea that the burgers they had been buying all these years contained anything other than prime cuts of beef.

But here was a TV chef showing them, in a 2011 edition of his US show Jamie's Food Revolution, how their burgers are bulked out by meat that in previous decades would have been used for dog food, and is only made fit for human consumption by being treated with chemicals.

Job losses

The decision by major US supermarkets, fast food restaurants - and some public schools - to stop using food that contains Lean Finely Textured Beef, to give "pink slime" its official name, is a victory for Oliver and online campaigners who railed against it.

Pink slime

- Lean Finely Textured Beef is made from fatty beef carcass off-cuts
- It is heated and spun in a centrifuge to remove most of the fat
- It is then exposed to ammonium hydroxide gas to kill bacteria such as E. coli and salmonella
- It has been added to burgers and other beef products in the US since the early 1990s to keep costs down
- The term "pink slime" was coined in 2002 by former US government scientist-turned whistleblower Gerald Zirnstein
- It was found in 70% of ground beef in US stores
- The US Department of Agriculture allowed schools to remove products containing "pink slime" after an online petition
- Supermarkets and fast food outlets also joined in the boycott
- The beef industry claims it would have to kill an extra 1.5 million cattle a year to make up the "pink slime" shortfall

But the resulting loss of 850 meat processing jobs, at a time when America is suffering high unemployment, has angered many - and turned Jamie Oliver into a hate figure on some message boards.

He probably did more than anybody to bring "pink slime" to mainstream attention in the US, although the social media campaign to kill it off did not take off until last month, when ABC World

News with Diane Sawyer ran an expose.

The US Department of Agriculture has now allowed schools to remove products containing "pink slime" from their cafeteria menus after Texan blogger Bettina Elias Siegel gathered more than 200,000 online signatures in nine days.

For the meat processing industry, it has been a bruising lesson in public relations and transparency in the age of social media.

Industry fight-back

It might also be the first example of a food ingredient being withdrawn not because of any safety fears, but because people have decided it sounds disgusting.

Industry chiefs are furious about what they see as a media-led smear campaign against a product that has been used in the US since the early 1990s and meets federal food safety standards.

Jamie Oliver first alerted Americans to what was in their burgers

Earlier this week, they launched a fight back - unveiling a new slogan "Dude, it's beef" and enlisting the help of Texas governor and former presidential candidate Rick Perry, who dutifully chowed down on a burger containing the stuff on a visit to a processing plant in South Sioux City, Nebraska.

To British eyes, this stunt contains echoes of Conservative government minister John Gummer feeding his young daughter a beefburger, in front of the TV news cameras, at the height of the "mad cow disease" controversy in 1990.

But unlike the BSE outbreak no-one is seriously suggesting "pink slime" is dangerous - or even that burgers containing it are significantly less tasty or nutritious than other beef products.

The industry has launched a website, beefisbeef.com, to emphasise this - although Gary Martin, president of brand-naming consultants Gary Martin Group, believes they are missing the point.

"Who cares whether it's 100% beef and who cares whether it's lacking bacteria, if it's something that you find disgusting?" he says.

Tragedy

He describes what has happened to the company driven out of business by the "pink slime" controversy as a tragedy.

But he says it was caused, in part, by the lack of a registered brand name for their main product.

The meat processing industry has launched a fight-back

"They didn't brand themselves so someone else did," he explains.

Lean beef trimmings have never marketed to the public as a product in their own right so it's doubtful the companies making them would have thought that they needed a brand name.

But, says Martin, if they had been thinking ahead, they might have called the product something consumer-friendly like "Pro-leana".

It might not have prevented the media backlash, but it might have helped them deal with it better, he argues.

Consumer anger

But, like most experts, he believes it is far too late to rebrand the product now, as it would be seen as a marketing "ploy", which would further inflame consumer anger.

"Pink slime" is, in any case, a far more powerful brand name than anything the industry could come up with.

"It is a powerful image. To try to replace that image with something else might be tough," says EJ Schultz, a food marketing writer with Advertising Age magazine.

He believes consumer anger has been driven by a lack of transparency.

"People are wondering 'why didn't I know about this before? Why wasn't this labelled?' People want everything labelled these days."

Jason Karpf, who teaches public relations and marketing, also believes the food industry has got a lot to learn about modern consumers.

He says: "The heightened nature of consumer awareness means that food manufacturers must look at every component of their end user product and imagine public reaction to it. Predict and prepare for public reaction."

The next 'pink slime'?

Meat processors have been adding beef scraps to burgers and other products since the 1970s to keep costs down - but they will now have to come with a replacement "that can withstand lay person scrutiny," says Mr Karpf.

"They are going to have to think about the product itself before they try to come up with a name, and a campaign, that - dare I say - the public will swallow."

He sees parallels with High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) - a substance added to food for more than 30 years, but which recent studies have linked to obesity.

The makers of HFCS, which is derived from a chemical process, rebranded it as "corn sugar" - but they are locked in a legal battle with the sugar industry over the use of the term.

"In decades past, High Fructose Corn Syrup was just an ingredient on the back label if people chose to read it" says Mr Karpf.

"It is under a spotlight. Lean Finely Textured Beef was something the public was unaware of until the great increase in media and social media gave it prominence."

But while HFCS may yet have a future, "pink slime" does not, he argues.

Others are not so sure. EJ Shultz believes food containing lean beef trimmings could, when properly labelled, become a low-cost alternative for cash-strapped beef lovers.

Branding consultant Denise Lee Yohn believes that for the companies involved, it might just be a case of waiting for the fuss to die down.

Social media is a powerful consumer advocacy tool but the groundswell of anger generated by it can also be short-lived, she argues.

"If they can wait it out, and let the hype die down, about six months from now no-one will think anything of it and they can come back with the product."