

ATTITUDES OF RETAIL BUTCHERS IN TASMANIA TO LAMB

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SUMMARY

About half of 47 butcher retailers surveyed in Hobart and Launceston had used heavyweight lambs. Of these 39% would not purchase heavyweight lambs again, due to their previous experience of size, fat cover, availability and purchase price. Boneless lamb cuts had been presented by 89% of all retailers surveyed and 71.5% of these stated that consumer interest was average to good. Differences in meat quality due to the sex of the lamb were not major issues with retailers. Of those surveyed 94% did not know what a cryptorchid was. This was reflected by the retailers placing a low importance on sex when ordering carcasses. The 2 most important factors to retailers when ordering lamb were weight and fatness.

Keywords: lamb, butchers, attitudes, survey.

INTRODUCTION

Consumption of lamb meat has declined throughout Australia and further drops have been predicted (Geldard and Jackson 1988). This decline has precipitated study of consumer attitude towards lamb (Hopkins and Congram 1985). One approach to counter this decline has been the development of a range of alternative cuts from large lean lambs (Currie and Thatcher 1988) in line with the results of consumer studies. A favourable reaction to these cuts has been found by test marketing (Currie and Thatcher 1988).

Information about retailing of lamb was not readily known in Tasmania. To address this issue, a survey of retail butchers was conducted in Launceston and Hobart. This paper reports on the retailers attitudes to lamb and in particular to heavyweight lambs.

METHOD

Forty-seven retailers selected from the central business district and major suburban areas of both Launceston and Hobart were surveyed using information supplied by the Meat and Allied Trades Federation. The selection covered a wide spectrum of locations to reduce the influence of particular socio-economic effects. Retailers were visited with a prepared questionnaire between 1000 and 1600 hours in order to avoid the peak work period which may have influenced their response to the questionnaire. The questions were:

1. Have you ever purchased lamb carcasses weighing over 22 kg?
2. Do you specify a particular fat depth when ordering lambs?
3. Would you buy larger size carcasses (weighing more than 22 kg) if they were available?
4. Have you ever purchased cryptorchids?
5. Have you noticed differences in meat quality in lambs of different sexes?
6. Have you presented and sold boneless lamb cuts? If so, what was the customer response?

In addition, when ordering lamb carcasses, the importance of fatness, conformation, sex, price, weight, fat and meat colour were rated in order of preference by each retailer. A total of 47 retailers participated in the survey, 21 were located in Launceston and 26 in Hobart.

To analyse the responses to the first 6 questions each was treated as a discrete variable, the number of states equalling the number of outcomes for the question concerned [e.g. for question 1 there were 2 states (outcomes)]. Retailer location was also added so the total number of states was 14. As an example, consider the case where the retailer was located in Launceston answered 'Yes' to question 1, 'No' to question 2, 'Yes' to questions 3 and 4 and 'No' to questions 5 and 6. This would be represented by a vector = [1 0 1 0 0 1 1 0 1 0 0 1 0 1]. Consequently, responses could be represented by a data matrix of order 47 × 14. This approach enabled associations between questions to be determined. Percentages were derived from the data matrix. The mean rankings were compared using a student *t* test.

RESULTS

For question 1, 'Have you ever purchased lamb carcasses weighing over 22 kg?', the results in table 1 show that half (51%) of the retailers surveyed had previously purchased heavyweight lamb carcasses

and that proportionally more in Launceston had done so. Although half the retailers had purchased heavyweight lamb carcasses previously their current interest in purchasing heavyweight lamb carcasses was low as shown in Table 1 by the response to question 3. Of the respondents 66% would not buy heavyweight carcasses if they were available and of these 39% had previously used carcasses weighing more than 22 kg. Because of their previous experience in terms of size, availability, purchase price and fat cover they would not buy heavyweight lambs again. Price, weight and fatness were all ranked of moderate to high importance when ordering lamb (Fig. 1). The means and standard deviations ($\pm$) were respectively 4.1 ± 2.1 ; 2.8 ± 1.5 ; 2.4 ± 1.4 . A consistency in answers was evident for questions 1 and 3 as, of those who would not buy heavyweight lambs if they were available, 61% had not used carcasses weighing more than 22 kg.

Table 1. The percentage (%) of retailers in Hobart and Launceston who responded 'yes' to the first 6 questions (Q) of the survey

Location	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
Hobart	38	35	31	8	19	96
Launceston	67	14	38	5	19	81
Overall	51	26	34	6	19	89

When asked whether they specified a fat depth when ordering lamb (question 2), it was found many retailers (74%) did not consciously specify the required level of fatness (Table 1). Yet fatness *per se* had the highest ranking in terms of preference when ordering carcasses (Fig. 1) regardless of location.

The response to question 4 demonstrates that there was a complete lack of knowledge of what a cryptorchid is and their current availability; only 6% (Table 1) had used them. From the sample there was no evidence that retailer location influenced the response. The result for question 5 (Table 1) indicates that differences in meat quality between sexes are not an issue for the majority of retailers (80%) this being consistent with the low ranking placed on sex when ordering lamb (Fig. 1). The mean ranking of sex, 6.3 ± 1.1 was significantly different to all other characters except fat colour. Of the 20% who claimed to have noticed differences, 67% had used heavyweight carcasses. In terms of meat quality (fat colour and meat colour) retailers placed a moderate ranking on these factors (Fig. 1) and the means were 5.1 ± 1.4 and 3.5 ± 1.6 which were not significantly different. The mean ranking of conformation was 3.7 ± 1.9 .

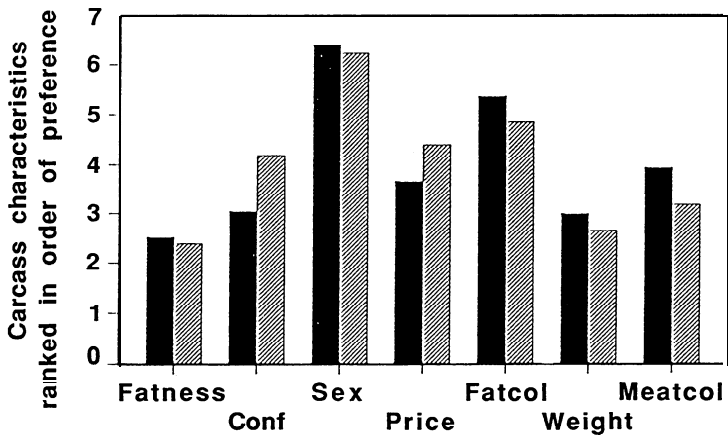


Fig. 1. Rank preferences for carcass characteristics by retailers in Hobart (shaded bars) and Launceston (solid bars) when ordering lamb carcasses (1, high to 7, low).Conf, conformation; Fatcol, fat colour; Meatcol, meat colour.

Question 6 demonstrates that a high proportion of retailers presented boneless lamb cuts to their clients. Of the retailers, 89% had sold boneless cuts of these; 43% indicated that the boneless cuts were

received well by consumers and 28.5% stated that there was an average response and a further 28.5% stated that the response by consumers was very poor. It is worth noting that of those retailers who had sold boneless cuts only 45% had used carcasses weighing more than 22 kg.

DISCUSSION

In the present survey 89% of the retail butchers indicated that they had presented boneless lamb cuts to their consumers with a 71.5% average to good response. Yet the retailers still presented bone-in lamb cuts, the traditional way. Many retailers had not and would not buy heavyweight lamb carcasses because these carcasses were over-fat. This is borne out by a survey of the lamb kill for a major Tasmanian abattoir (Pirlot *et al.* 1992) for the year 1989/90 where 0.5% of the lamb met Elite Lamb specifications (22 kg and a fat score 2 or 3) and most of the lamb carcasses over 22 kg had a fat score 4 or 5. This attitude was consistent as fatness *per se* of the carcass was ranked of most importance by retailers when ordering carcasses. It was interesting that only 6% of retailers knew what a cryptorchid was or had purchased them, since these are known to be leaner at heavy weights (Hopkins *et al.* 1990). Despite the significant importance of fatness, low emphasis was placed on specifying a fat depth when ordering carcasses. This tends to indicate retailers use broad descriptions for fatness e.g. too fat, too lean, and their suppliers know the range they will accept.

A consumer survey conducted in Tasmania, in which a choice between bone-in and boneless cuts was given (Hopkins and Saunders 1990), showed that preference was influenced by the type of cut. However a positive acceptance by retailers' clientele of boneless cuts has been shown, even though most of the carcasses utilised were not of optimum size and leanness. Weight and fatness of the carcass were considered of prime importance when ordering lambs, yet in many cases retailers leave it to their buyers to decide on the type of lamb purchased. This should be recognised when attempting to influence butchers. The majority of retailers reported no meat quality differences between sexes and of those who did, most had used heavyweight carcasses. Sex was considered unimportant when ordering carcasses but we believe this was because retailers could not distinguish between the sexes. Their lack of knowledge about cryptorchids supports this.

It is important to realise that the retail butcher is influenced by his supplier of lamb. The retailer should be educated on how to utilise large, lean lamb carcasses so as to meet consumer requirements.

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