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Daily Blog

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Animal-friendly labels appeal to buyers

Maria Humel has a soft spot for animals -- and kids who demand chicken parmesan and chicken fingers.

Heinen's, a store with a meat case featuring products stamped "Certified Humane," helps balance her compassion with their consumption.

The label on the boneless, skinless chicken breasts means the birds Humel buys were given clean water and hormone-free food, and lived in roomy cages with access to at least eight hours of real or artificial sunlight every day.

Those are some of the guidelines set by veterinarians and others for an animal rights group that created the label.

"That's very important to me because I really should be a vegetarian," Humel said while shopping at Heinen's Fine Foods near Cleveland. "It matters how the animals are treated and how they're fed."

Family-owned Heinen's, based in Warrensville Heights, is among a growing number of U.S. grocery stores selling meat, poultry and dairy under the reassuring labels that are luring compassionate carnivores willing to spend more.

"We believe in treating everyone fairly and with respect, and this extends to the animals that supply the food we select for our customers," said Tom Heinen, co-president of the company where annual sales topped \$316 million last year.

That's why Humel shrugs off the \$4.99 a pound price -- compared with \$3.29 for regular chicken breasts. Peace of mind is worth it, she says, and now, this is the only place she shops.

That's a perk for the smaller, mostly family-owned stores such as D'Agostino in New York and Andronico's Market in San Francisco, which are heavily promoting certified humane products.

In the age of Super Wal-Marts, huge grocery chains and discount bulk-buy clubs, appealing to these consumers is a good idea, said Seth Mendelson, publisher of the New York-based industry journal Grocery Headquarters.

"They have to compete on a niche," Mendelson said. "I tell the little guys all the time, 'If you're going to try to compete with the big guys on price, you're going to lose. Do something that offers a different experience, that sets you apart.'"

According to the industry group Food Marketing Institute, about a third of the nation's 34,000 supermarkets -- stores with more than \$2 million in annual sales -- are independently owned and account for about 10 percent of the industry's \$478.9 billion in 2005 sales.

Nick D'Agostino III, chief executive and the third generation to run the 23-store New York-based grocery chain, said sales of some of his products have gone way up since the company began promoting the "certified humane" logo two years ago.

The store sells more than 35 certified humane foods, including yogurt, milk, chicken, butter, eggs, pork and veal -- a meat whose sales have gone up more than 25 percent since the store began selling it with the label, D'Agostino said.

Traditional veal comes from calves usually confined to small crates thought to keep the meat tender by reducing muscle use; certified humane veal must come from younger cows that were not confined.

"Customers that are aware of what happens to the animal before they go to market care about this," D'Agostino said. "If you can take that barrier out of their way it makes it easier for them."

Though the label has been good for business, D'Agostino said it also creates a delicate dilemma for the store, which doesn't want other customers to feel guilty.

"Our biggest challenge right now is trying to find an appropriate way to tell the customers what certified humane means," he said. "We want to leave it up to the customer to buy what they want."

D'Agostino has included details about the label in its weekly ads, hung signs in stores and posted information online.

As organic foods and healthier eating become popular -- sales in the United States top \$11 billion annually, according to the U.S. Market for Organic Foods and Beverages -- the number of labels meant to address concerns about inhumane treatment and cruelty to animals is growing.

Consumers might see "caged free," "free farmed" and "animal compassionate," which will be used on a line of meats sold by Austin, Texas-based Whole Foods Markets Inc.

The higher-end Whole Foods plans to begin selling the labeled meats at some of its 191 stores in North America and the United Kingdom later this year, said spokeswoman Amy Schaefer.

But the store acknowledges the trend is not something easily replicated on a large scale because of the stringent standards behind the labels. The standards are typically met by smaller, local producers who can afford to spend more time and choose to sometimes spend more money on things such as maintaining larger animal pens and feeding organic diets. Such standards also have become a way for local farmers and ranchers to compete against megafarms and large food suppliers.

"The products will be available on a more limited and perhaps local basis. This is not the kind of product that can support a national distribution," Schaefer said.

Some meat producers complain about the labels, saying most industry groups have their own animal welfare standards.

"Just because it doesn't have a label doesn't mean the product is unsafe or that the animals were raised in an inhumane way," said Sherrie Niekamp, spokeswoman for the National Pork Board.

Labels vary because each group has its own standards and verification requirements.

To use "Certified Humane Raised and Handled," producers must meet standards set by Humane Farm Animal Care, a nonprofit group of veterinarians, farmers and animal welfare advocates based in Herndon, Va.

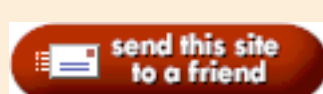
Its rules include a diet free of antibiotics and hormones, adequate roaming space and shelter, and slaughtering procedures that are more stringent than federal law. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is paid to help ensure compliance.

"That accreditation tells the public that we're doing everything we say we're doing," said Adele Douglass, HFAC's executive director. "When they look at that label they know that every producer has met all the standards."

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