

Think you can you make the cut? Judging meat: It's a college 'sport'

■ Competing teams are intensely serious about the ability to recognize the slightest flaw in a cut of meat

By Jason Nark
The Philadelphia Inquirer

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — Students circled up in the lecture hall and locked hands, their red hardhats bowed toward their boots. In a nearby meat locker, their practice exams hung on hooks.

They thanked the Lord for safe travels from Lubbock, Texas, to Pat's and Geno's Steaks in South Philly, where they sampled cheesesteaks, and now to this small building in the shadow of Penn State's Beaver Stadium. After a collective "amen," the Texas Tech University Red Raiders went into the locker to scrutinize frozen pig carcasses and other cuts of pork and beef.

"Welcome, meat judges!" was written on the dry-erase board.

There is a competitive world of collegiate meat judging, and in it, Texas Tech is a dynasty, with the national championship often changing hands between that team and archrival Oklahoma State. Yes, this is serious, though a recent Friday morning was merely practice, a warm-up for the Eastern National Intercollegiate Meat Judging Contest the following day at Cargill Meat Solutions in Bradford County. The American Meat Science Association said the first such program started in 1926 at the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago.

While there are trophies and bragging rights involved, meat judging, like agricultural fairs, has real-world applications for the beef industry, educators, and butchers. Cuts of beef, fat content, even bone-in vs. boneless are standards checked by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Most competitions are beef, pork, and lamb. In some areas, though, hosts will present a special cut for judgment, such as goat in the Southwest; in Pennsylvania the next day, it would be veal.

"Those are national standards from East to West," said Jonathan A. Campbell, an associate professor at Penn State and the school's meat specialist. "Whether you're buying from California or the Midwest or the East Coast, meat companies would standardize where those cuts were from and what can and can't be in that package."

That Friday, the University of Florida team arrived at Penn State's Meats Laboratory first, and the Gators were already in the meat locker when Texas Tech's large team strode in wearing knee-length, insulated red coats. The teams were made up of both men and women, but while Florida and the Ohio State Buckeyes had about a half-dozen students each, Texas Tech had nearly two dozen, all of them in and out of the freezers for the early-morning "workouts."

"I mean, we call it a workout, but we're not in shape," said Kyle Mendes, the University of Florida's meat coach.

The Florida team also came to Penn State via Philadelphia, but skipped the better-known cheesesteak haunts for John's Roast Pork in South Philly. The Gators were traveling in a 15-passenger van.



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University of Florida meat judging team members, including senior Allison Conchiglia, left, practice judging specifications at Penn State University's meats lab in State College, Pennsylvania.



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University of Florida meat judging coach Kyle Mendes, left, a doctoral student in meat science, talks to his team before they begin practice judging specifications at Penn State University's meats lab in State College, Pennsylvania.

"It renewed my faith in the cheesesteak, but apparently I should have gotten the pork," Mendes said.

Meat judging, as you might imagine, is more popular in rural states where agriculture is a major force, including Texas, Oklahoma, Florida, California, and Colorado. Texas is home to the most beef cattle in the United States, with 4.6 million. Pennsylvania ranks 33rd on that list, with 225,000; New Jersey is 44th, with 9,500. Penn State did not have the numbers to field a team this year, but plaques from past victories line a wall in the lecture hall. Campbell was more than happy to let the teams get some walk-throughs in before the big day, though.

"We have the meat, and it's something most teams would do for each other," Campbell, a former coach at Iowa State, said.

Campbell set up the freezer for the students but was also around to prepare for Penn State's weekly meat sale. Outside, a line of customers was already winding down the sidewalk. The Nittany Lions were playing at Maryland that week, but if there were a home game, Campbell said, the line would be stretching for a quarter-mile.

"People camp here and will just take the steaks back to their RV and start grilling," he said.

Joining a meat judging team provides ample networking for students who want to get into the beef industry, like Jacob Lehman, a fourth-year animal science major at Florida.

"I just haven't decided if I want to be in the live side of beef production or the dead side," Lehman said in the meat lab's lecture hall.

Mendes said Texas Tech's coach, Mark Miller, is comparable to the nation's best football coaches. Miller is the "San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo Distinguished Chair in Meat Sciences" at Texas Tech, too, but remains humble about the team's 12 national championships. The previous day, his team stopped at a veal plant for some fine-tuning.

"I've been doing this for 40 years," Miller said. "We're here to make sure we're as sharp as we can be for tomorrow. Just like a football team. We want to be a sharpened point tomorrow."

Miller, sounding very much like a coach, said it takes heart to be a champion meat judge, along with work ethic. "You just can't teach that," he said.

In the meat locker, the Gators were mostly quiet, moving around a table of meat with their clipboards and marking off a list with pencils. Some of the categories were "rib number incorrect" and "length of cut." Mendes

stood back and watched his students. Some of the cuts, he said, had defects purposely left in them, such as too much bone.

"These cuts give us a universal language to understand what we're asking for and what we're getting," he said.

Tommy Fletcher, 23, of La Vernia, Texas, is a graduate student and coach at Texas Tech. He was an all-American meat judge for the team, training in high school thanks to Future Farmers of America programs in his home state.

"It's been a long couple of days," he said. "Last night was our first full night of sleep."

The following morning, at the Cargill plant in Wyalusing, Bradford County, the competition began around dawn and lasted until well after noon. Florida took home the team title. Texas Tech finished fourth behind Kansas State and the University of Illinois. Kansas

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— Mark Miller, coach of Texas Tech University's meat-judging team

State won the overall title for the day.

In individual rankings, Lehman came in seventh.

Oklahoma State, which has won 19 national meat judging championships, finished sixth in Pennsylvania. The national championships take place next month in Dakota City, Neb.

Conner McKinzie, who led the Texas Tech Raiders in the Friday morning prayer at Penn State, said that most of his teammates are there for the camaraderie. But they definitely want to beat the Cowboys come November.

Last year, Texas Tech lost to Oklahoma State by a mere 48 points.

"It is a competition," said McKinzie, of Stephenville, Texas. "We have a great legacy and we always have the goal of winning and being national champions."

Look online for local food stands

SALEM — Pumpkins, apples, pears, and squash are just a few examples of the favorites of fall harvest. If you want to venture out into the beautiful countryside and buy seasonal food directly from a farmer or rancher — where do you go?

"Everyone knows where their local farmers market is, but not everyone knows where to find roadside farm stands, pumpkin patches, u-pick orchards, and harvest events. That's where Oregon's Bounty comes in," said Anne Marie Moss, Oregon Farm Bureau communications director.

Oregon's Bounty at OregonFB.org is a searchable online directory of nearly 300 family farms and ranches that sell food and foliage directly to the public.

The Oregon's Bounty website allows visitors to search for a specific agriculture product — like pumpkins or apples — and/or search for farms within a specific region of the state, such as Eastern Oregon, Portland Metro, the Gorge or the Willamette Valley. Visitors can also do a search for "u-pick" or "events" to locate those activities.

"Oregonians love farm-fresh food. Thanks to the diversity of Oregon agriculture, we can buy an enormous variety of fruits, vegetables, meat, nuts, flowers, and much more directly from the families who grew it," Moss said.

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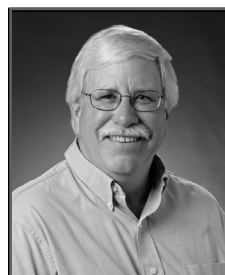
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