BEEF

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Groceries are working around the clock to stock shelves, but are seeing some shortages.

In California, which is one of the biggest beef producing states in the U.S., cattle ranchers are not immune to the fallout. For large operations in particular, the reduction in processing has meant a sharp decline in the number of cattle they can get to market.

Reshuffling is going to take some time, and supply might fall short as long as the bottleneck is there, said Dave Daley, a fifth-generation cattleman in Butte County and chair of the California Cattle Council.

"The most important thing we can do is to get those processing facilities open and working and safe," because local butchers can't make up for shuttered processing plants that normally handle thousands of cattle per day, Daley said.

Luckily, cattle can be held onto longer than chicken and pork, and Daley said he does not expect California ranchers to begin killing off unused animals. They will keep herds on green pastures and keep looking for ways to sell more animals into the market, he said.

Still, the outlook is cloudy.

Buyers of ranch cattle are unsure of what demand will look like in coming weeks, and how many animals they will be able to move into market due to processing slowdowns, all of which has held down the price per head even though grocery demand is high, Daley said.

"Logically, if people want to buy it, the price would go up. The problem is we can't get it through the process," he said. "There is a lot of frustration in the agriculture community."

Some critics of the meat industry say a drop in meat consumption would be a good thing, given the industry's contribution to climate change, the health impacts of a meat-heavy diet and ethical concerns about eating animals. But meat producers say it's hardly the time to let such a vital supply of food shrivel.

To help, customers shouldn't hoard meat, because that frustrates efforts to reach a new balance between supply and demand and adds volatility to pricing, those in the industry said. Shoppers also shouldn't fear that suddenly there will be no meat, because there is a lot of it in California. But they will need to be patient.

Until the processing facilities are up and running again, buyers can expect less variety, fewer brands and more reliance on frozen products, Daley and others said.

"We'll get you the beef, but we gotta get time to get it through that processing facility," Daley said.

Buyers should also get more creative, said Chelsea Minor, corporate director of public affairs for Raley's, a family-owned grocery chain with 127 stores in Northern California and Nevada.

Some processing facilities are looking for ways to speed up production, and one way to do that would be to spend less time deboning cuts of meat. Shoppers could help facilitate the shift by increasing demand for those cuts, Minor said.

"Don't be afraid of a bone," she said. "Don't be afraid to try something different."

Cody Nicholson Stratton, a dairy farmer who also sells meat from his family's land in Ferndale, said big processors are important because they help feed big urban populations cheaply. But the current crisis has highlighted the lack of diversity in processing in California, as smaller butcheries have gone away and large processors have grown in market share.

That makes everyone in the industry more vulnerable to sudden shutdowns of big processing facilities, he said. "We need more butchers. We need more independent processors," he said.

But it also shows how important smaller producers are in the market, especially now.

From his family's farm, which he helps run alongside his family and husband Thomas, Nicholson Stratton has continued providing dairy for partner Rumiano Cheese Co. And on his own website, under the Foggy Bottoms Boys brand, Nicholson Stratton has continued offering up meat, including beef tongue for $20, a pound of ground beef for $10 and marrow bones for $15.

"More people are shopping closer to home, buying directly from a farmer right now when they maybe hadn't in the past," he said.

Belcampo, which sells organic meats at a premium in boutique butcheries in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, has seen in-store butcher shop sales nearly quadruple, and online sales explode.

PANCAKES

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• The binder. Binders, such as beaten raw egg, help keep grated potato from falling apart like the Habsburg Empire. I'd say one egg per couple pounds of potatoes should do the trick, but, add more if you like. Who am I, Leslie Limit-Your-Egg-Consumption? Besides, more egg equals more protein.

You can also add some flour, maybe a couple tablespoons per pound for starchy potatoes like russets, and a touch more for what we call "waxy" potatoes, like red potatoes.

• The flavoring ingredients. I love white pepper in potato pancakes, but, not so much that it tastes crazy. It's a peculiar flavor, white pepper. My friend and former colleague chef Dina Altieri says it always reminds her of Band-Aids. So, maybe it's ix-nay on the ite-pepper-whay.

You know what else I love? Well, comfortable socks, but, apropos of this article, onion. You can dice it, but, I like to grate it, maybe half an onion per pound. Grated onion is very watery, but, if you grate it into cheesecloth or a clean (duh!) kitchen towel, you can squeeze out the juice. You should try a sip of that juice, by the way. It's one of the most offensive things I've ever put in my mouth. If you have mortal enemies, use it to make them a cocktail. Like a rum 'n' onion. Pairs well with coelacanth and applesauce. Anyway, I never bother with the squeezing.

You also can add fresh herbs or cheese — cheddar, Parmesan and ricotta are all nice — or cooked and crumbled bacon or sausage. It's all delicious.

• Salt. Potatoes are as bland as an Andy Williams album. (Here come the angry letters calling me "Sonny.") They need more salt than you probably realize. I'll say more about this below, but, as always, taste as you go.

Here's what you do:

1. Combine all your ingredients in a bowl. If you're using raw potatoes and especially if you've added grated onion, water will start oozing out and it'll look fairly scary, like a hand might reach out of it and grab you by the neck. Don't panic. Just stir it all back together right before cooking. Or, pour off the water and give another quick stir.

2. Now, here's some really good advice: Before making your pancakes, cook off a little portion of the mixture so you can taste it for seasoning. That way, you can make any adjustments — like adding more salt — before you cook it for real. Dig?

3. When you're confident the seasoning is correct, heat up a nonstick pan or two and add a bit of fat, just enough to coat the bottom of the pan, or, if it's super nonstick, just enough to roll around from side to side in the bottom of the pan. When the oil is hot, add the potato mixture. I use two 8-inch nonstick saute pans and cover the entire bottoms with the potato glop. It makes big pancakes that I cut into extremely attractive wedges to serve. You could also use a giant nonstick pan or a sprayed griddle and make smaller pancakes.

4. Whatever you decide, cook the pancakes over medium to medium high heat. Thinner ones cook more quickly and are crispier, whereas thicker pancakes (like the ones I make) are softer with a creamier interior. If your pancakes are thick, you could cover the pan to ensure that the interior cooks before the bottom burns. It'll retain more moisture that way, giving you less crunch. Figure about 3 to 5 minutes per side, depending on the size.

If your potato pancakes are well-seasoned and flavorful, you can just eat them as is, straight out of the pan, like the storied bachelors of yore. Or, you could serve them on a plate as if Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands were coming over.

Now, go gather the gang and commence peeling.

POTATO PANCAKES

Prep: 15 minutes
Cook: 20-25 minutes
Makes: about 8 servings (four 8-inch pancakes)

1 egg
2 pounds russet potatoes
1 medium onion
1/4 cup flour
2 teaspoons kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon white or black pepper, ground
Vegetable oil as needed
Sour cream and applesauce

1. Break egg into a large bowl and whisk lightly.

2. Peel potatoes, grate them, then add to the bowl on top of egg.

3. Peel onion, grate it, then add to the bowl on top of potatoes.

4. Add flour, salt and pepper. Stir to combine all ingredients thoroughly. As the batter sits, the water will separate from the potatoes. Either pour it off or stir it back into the mixture to create an even consistency before cooking.

5. Heat an 8-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat. (Note: If you have two 8-inch pans, use them both to cut down on cooking time.) When hot, add oil to coat bottom. Spoon one-quarter of potato mixture into pan and smooth out to cover entire bottom evenly. Cook over medium heat until golden brown and crisp, 8-10 minutes. Flip and cook other side until bottom is brown and crispy and potatoes are cooked through, 8-10 minutes. Remove to a warm plate and keep in a warm oven until all pancakes are made.

6. Cut pancakes into wedges and serve immediately with sour cream and applesauce.

Nutrition information per pancake: 165 calories, 4 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 29 g carbohydrates, 3 g sugar, 4 g protein, 495 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

MIKE

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Portland came back and the series was tied at 2-2 before Chicago took a crucial Game 5 on the Blazers' home court behind Jordan's 46-point effort. The Bulls clinched the title in Chicago with a 97-93 Game 6 triumph. Jordan scored a mere 33 in that one.

For the series, Jordan averaged 35.8 points per game.

A few weeks later, Jordan was back in Portland with the original "Dream Team" for the Tournament of the Americas, the competition to decide the top four teams from the Americas that qualified for the Barcelona Olympics.

Team USA overwhelmed the competition, but my biggest memory is the party Phil Knight threw at the Nike campus in Beaverton. Mountains of shrimp and oysters were served. Anyone who was anyone was there. It ended with a fireworks display (which started a small brush fire).

That team, of course, won the gold in Barcelona.

My other up-close glimpse of Jordan's greatness came in the 1998 Finals against Utah. I helped with the games in Salt Lake City and was a few rows behind the Bulls' bench for Jordan's famed "flu" game.

While I was in Salt Lake City, the Phoenix AP bureau's leadership was trying to convince me to take the Phoenix sports writing job. They flew me from Salt Lake City to make their case.

They didn't know I'd already decided to take the job.

I returned in time for Game 5 in Salt Lake City, on a night that added to Jordan lore.

Suffering from flu-like symptoms, Jordan got off to a slow start but, although in obvious distress, he erupted for 17 points in the second quarter.

When he sat on the bench in front of me, I could see his body was beaded with sweat, not the kind of sweat that comes from athletic endeavor but the kind that says "I'm sick."

Jordan finished with 38 points, including the 3-pointer that put the Bulls up for good in a 90-88 victory.

"I almost played myself into passing out," Jordan said after the game. "I came in and I was almost dehydrated, and it was all just to win a basketball game. I couldn't breathe. My energy level was really low. My mouth was really dry. They started giving me Gatorade, and I thought about an IV."

Whether it was food poisoning or the flu, (or a hangover for that matter), he felt lousy yet played remarkably. The Bulls eventually won the series in six games. Jordan earned his sixth and final championship.

He was the best clutch player I ever saw, with Larry Bird a close second.

That's what was so great about covering the NBA for so long during the game's heyday.

I got to see Bird, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Julius Erving, Magic Johnson, James Worthy, Tim Duncan, Kobe Bryant, Scottie Pippen, David Robinson, Bill Walton, Charles Barkley, Steve Nash (many times), Steph Curry and, of course, LeBron James.

As someone who could barely dribble with his left hand and once missed two free throws that cost us a JV game in Cove, I was an unlikely candidate to get to see, in person, these marvelous athletes at their best over so many years.

I was often impressed; occasionally in awe.

And no one was better than Mike.

Editor's note: Bob Baum, who grew up in Union, retired last year after 43 years with The Associated Press ± 23 as news reporter/Oregon sports editor in Portland and 20 as senior sports writer in Phoenix, Arizona. He and his wife Leah live in Island City with their four cats and two dogs.

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