

FOOD *ff* FOCUS

GROUND BEEF



Generational growth

Photos by Getty

Ground beef booms, driven by younger consumers.

by Ed Finkel,
contributing editor

Despite being a large category to begin with, ground beef sales have continued to sizzle, driven significantly by purchasing behaviors of younger generations.

Sales of ground beef rose 9.4% to \$15.1 billion for the 52 weeks ending Nov. 3, slightly outpacing the overall beef category, which rose 9.2% to \$39.4 billion over the same time

period, according to multi-outlet data from Circana. Volume sales for ground beef were up 3.1% to 2.9 billion pounds, as prices rose 6.1% to \$5.19 per pound.

“Beef overall has had a great year, and ground beef continues to grow even faster,” says Chris DuBois, executive vice president and perimeter practice leader for Circana. “It’s been on a tear for four years,

and doesn’t look like it’s stopping.” Tray packs (10.7%) have grown faster than chubs (5%) or patties (3%). “People are taking the tray packs and using it in lots of different ways,” he adds.

Younger generations have driven the growth of ground beef, says Anne-Marie Roerink, principal at 210 Analytics. “In part, this is cooking knowledge but also

aligns with the types of meals Gen Z and Millennials tend to prepare,” she says. “Meals such as pasta and tacos are far more popular among younger generations.” She adds, based on Circana figures, “The five-year growth for ground beef is astounding, from \$10.5 billion in 2019 to \$15.1 billion in 2025.”

Steve Hixon, vice president of customer engagement at Midan

Marketing, believes grinds will continue to lead the beef category in 2025, and that burgers will be the “go to.” Citing Circana data from a November webinar hosted by the Meat Institute, Hixon notes that Millennials and Gen X are contributing 77% of ground meat dollar growth, while Gen Z is buying based on brand, nutrition and mood, and Boomers are buying based on quality and price.

Ground beef accounts for 20% of all fresh meat sales in dollars, and 17% by volume, notes Elizabeth Smith, associate director of market research at the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), citing Circana data. In addition, ground beef represents 37% of beef sales in dollars, and nearly half of the volume, Smith says.

Dustin Dalia, brand manager for Tyson

Foods, cites NCBA data from June 2024 that showed 13% of consumers planned to buy more ground beef than the previous year. “During a year when many consumers faced inflation concerns and price sensitivity across purchase categories, affordable and versatile ground beef held strong,” he says. “As at-home dining remains popular among American consumers, it’s no surprise that consumers are navigating to ground beef as a key player in their meals prepared at home.”

Niman Ranch has witnessed a similar phenomenon, according to John Tarpoff II, vice president of beef. “There’s a lot to love about ground beef: It’s fast and easy to prepare for novice home chefs, freezes well and carries great flavor,” he says. “Despite higher beef prices,

ground beef remains a wallet-friendly option, even with premium programs like Niman Ranch.”

Dominick Zirilli, corporate executive chef for Thomas Foods USA, says ground beef offers consumers and brands plenty of flexibility in lean points, blends, weight and thickness. “We continue to see growth in our value pack of \$10 for 10 burgers, as well as premium Angus blends at 5.3 ounces with a ‘homestyle’ shape,” he says.

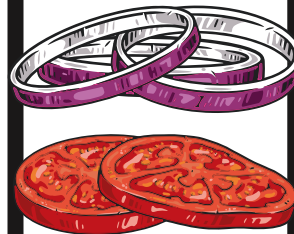
“Wagyu continues to trend up as well.”

Ray Rastelli Jr., president of Rastelli Foods Group, predicts continued success for the category in 2025. “The versatility and convenience of ground beef have solidified its role as a center-of-the-plate option for many households,” he says.



BURGERS ARE THE BEEF SANDWICH consumers are most likely to prepare at home at least occasionally, at 83% overall, followed by roast beef (55%), Mexican-style (45%) and steak (43%).

– Technomic Ignite Menu



ONION IS THE FLAVOR most often paired with ground beef at foodservice (47.4%), followed by tomato (44%), lettuce (34.7%) and chicken (33.1%).

– Datassential Menu Matters



WHAT’S NEW



BLEND IN

Niman Ranch debuted a new frozen, direct-to-consumer ground beef product called “Butcher Blend” last fall. “The blends features a higher fat ratio for extra juicy burgers, meatballs and more,” says John Tarpoff II, vice president of beef. “This innovation offers a great value of ground beef without sacrificing the Niman Ranch premium claims and great taste consumers prioritize.”

The fastest-growing ingredient pairings for dishes with ground beef include pineapple salsa, bacon jam, artichoke and street corn, while the fastest-growing flavor profiles include cilantro jalapeño, Asian flavors and maple.

– Technomic National Food Trends data provided by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association



While consumers are perhaps most often seeking the basics in the ground beef category, some are drawn to value-added offerings in the meat case, and others to specific grinds.

Among the flavors and seasonings on the radar of Chris DuBois, executive vice president at Circana, have been: bourbon, up 80% for the 52 weeks ending Dec. 1; onion, up 35%; peppered beef, up 16%; and bacon, up 12%. Garlic is only up 1.4%, and generic “seasoned” is down 25%.

“Flavored ground beef with bacon is a big deal,” DuBois says. Bourbon, he adds, picks up both sweet and smoky flavors, and “it wouldn’t surprise me to see local variations on that, too. In the Midwest or South, everybody has got their favorite bourbon.”

Different global cuisines are top-of-mind at Thomas Foods USA as it prepares ground meat for usage in burgers, tacos, meatballs, sauces, chilis and stews, including bowl-style meals, says Dominick Zirilli, corporate executive chef. “Consumers continue to

see exciting flavor profiles through seasonings and sauces, with a lot of excitement around Mediterranean, Latin American and Asian flavor profiles,” he says.

Rastelli Foods Group foresees a blend of down-home and international flavors in the coming year, says Ray Rastelli Jr., company president. “Flavor

trends in 2025 are set to focus on ‘reviving roots,’ or what can be called ‘going back to basics,’” he says. “This includes incorporating globally inspired ingredients that evoke a sense of home and nostalgia.”

Anne-Marie Roerink, principal at 210 Analytics, says that some grocers are going beyond lean percent-

ages and pack sizes to give consumers grind variety. “Retailers are experimenting with different primals, such as ground ribeye or sirloin,” she says. “This is interesting in light of affordability. While a shopper may not be able to afford a ribeye for dinner, ground gives a more affordable route to their beloved cuts.”



Ground beef has become somewhat less ubiquitous at foodservice, but consumer behavior might prompt restaurants to question the wisdom of that trend.

Ground beef is found on 22.3% of all menus, down 7% since 2020, according to Datassential, most often for hamburgers but also for chili, tacos, and as a topping on pizza, pasta or nachos. It’s most commonly found in midscale (27.5% of menus) and casual (26.2%) outlets, regional chains (24.8%),

and in the Midwest (25.7%), as well as on Mexican (48.3%), pizza (20.7%), American (10.6%) and Italian (7.3%) menus, Datassential found.

Restaurants juggling rapidly rising labor and ingredient costs have had to adjust prices to maintain margins, which has led many to focus on chicken as a main ingredient, for

both affordability and health-related reasons, perhaps most famously the McDonald’s rollout of the Chicken Big Mac, says Anne-Marie Roerink, principal at 210 Analytics.

But she’s not convinced by that strategy. “Ground beef’s strength and popularity in retail should have fast-food and quick-serve restaurants doing a double-take to review whether they are passing up sales opportunities by deemphasizing ground-beef products,” she says. “The sustained and robust pound growth of ground beef at retail certainly seems to indicate that consumers are willing to pay a little extra.”

More than half (51%) of diners say they “love” ground beef, and another 35% “like” it; 56% have had it “many times.” Those most likely to love ground beef include meat eaters (57%), people who have children (56%), Southerners and Black Americans (55% each), and Gen Xers and self-described “foodies” (54% each), according to Datassential.

Another indication of the popularity: “Hamburger/cheeseburger” is the type of beef sandwich that consumers were most likely to say they would order at least occasionally (once every 90 days), at 85% overall and 88% for those ages 35 and over, followed by roast beef (62%), cheesesteak (57%) and Mexican-style sandwich (53%), according to Technomic.



CLAIMS LASSO CONSUMERS

While the ground beef category might be primarily about indulgence and taste, health claims drive at least a portion of the business.

Lower-fat grinds between 90% and 94% lean were up 14.3% for the 52 weeks ending Dec. 1, more than two points higher than higher-fat packages between 70% and 77%, according to Circana figures. “It is sort of sur-

prising,” says Chris DuBois, executive vice president. “It’s not like [higher-fat] is dropping, lower-fat is just growing faster.”

Citing Circana figures for the same time period, Anne-Marie Roerink, principal at 210 Analytics, notes ground beef with antibiotic-related claims grew 18.6% (about double the overall category) while organic ground beef shot up 26.9%, nearly triple

the total and comprising about 6.1% of total ground beef sales; grass fed, meanwhile, skyrocketed 26.3%, reaching just under 8% of the total.

Thomas Foods USA sees organic, grass fed and grass finished, all natural and Halal as claims seeming high demand and high growth, says Dominick Zirilli, corporate executive chef. “Customers and consumers are very interested

to know if products are both grass fed and grass finished,” he says. “They are also seeking products with animal welfare claims, and are interested to learn more about sustainable practices.”

While the dominant narrative used to be that red meat was bad for your health, consumers and nutritionists increasingly see “clean” (rather than ultra-processed) proteins

as better for you, says John Tarpoff II, vice president of beef at Niman Ranch.

“Health-focused consumers are prioritizing red meat with robust animal welfare and sustainability claims,” he says, adding that Niman offers certified humane, no antibiotics or added hormones Angus beef for both retail and foodservice, all 100% born, raised and harvested in the U.S.



TRUE OR FALSE

71.3%

of respondents answered “false.”

• THE ANSWER: **FALSE** •

Because we are filing this feature right around Trump’s second inauguration, we cannot state with absolute certainty what will happen because of Trump’s trade policies – or, frankly, if he’ll even be able to implement his vaunted 10% tariff on all U.S. imports and 60% tariff on Chinese goods. However, as more than 70% of Meatingplace’s readers correctly stated, experts have anticipated significant problems if Trump is able to implement his agenda. As we explore in this very issue in “The Trump Cards” (p. 26), not only could retaliatory tariffs boost meat production in other countries, but also other agriculture markets with key meat interests (such as corn) could shift as well. Some experts, however, are taking the optimistic approach, and Meatingplace will be closely covering the developments as 2025 progresses.