

## PROFILE: Samurai of Swine

First, he sends a letter. "Dear So and So," Joe Leathers recites from memory. "So and So came into your store and saw that you had America's Cut in your meat case. However, your display did not hold up to our standards. Please discontinue using the America's Cut logo or you will be in direct violation of a registered trademark."

"That scares people," grins Leathers, the aptly named director of retail marketing for the National Pork Producers Council. Deadpan, he adds, "Then, if they don't do it right, you go in and shoot them."

A knife might be a more appropriate weapon for the man known as the Samurai of Swine.

The flamboyant Leathers has spent the past 25 years learning all about pork. "I've been known to jump up and down in a grocery store when I see a pork display that doesn't look good," Leathers admits.

He recommends similar behavior to pork producers. "Go in there and knock on the glass window. Grab that meat manager by the back of the neck, haul him out there, and say, 'That's my product in that case. You aren't representing it right.'

"There's 200,000 pork producers out there," says the pork council representative. "I'd like to deputize them tomorrow and tell them, 'You're on pork watch.'"

About five years ago, Leathers piggybacked on a product idea from Iowa hog producers called Iowa Chops. It was a good idea, but the name wouldn't play in Illinois or any other competitive pork-producing state. Still, it

made Leathers wonder just what would happen if all producers got behind a product and pushed it.

America's Cut became the first retail meat cut ever trademarked. The 1¼- to 1½-inch-thick boneless pork steak is part of the council's campaign to promote the meat as a product with pizzazz. That's one of Leathers' favorite words and one he has used quite a bit in the 500 seminars he has presented to meat managers and others.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of pork merchandising," Leathers says in a video version of one of these seminars. In the video, he advises meat managers how to cut, tray, garnish, and talk pork.

"Show the customer as much variety as possible," he preaches to his audience as he slices and dices the meat. "You're not meat cutters anymore, you're artists," he tells them.

Meat managers may no longer think of themselves as butchers, but it must be difficult to convince them they're really Picassos at heart.

One way Leathers increases his credibility is to harken back to his Austin, Minn., days on the kill floor.

"I was a hog header [at Hormel],"

Leathers says. "It took me six months to be able to open my car door at night because my hands were so sore," he adds, in what is perhaps a bit of hog hyperbole.

From the packer-processing side of the pork industry, Leathers moved on to retail, where he became a meat department manager. In 1986, he joined the National Pork Producers Council based in Des Moines, Iowa. As director of retail marketing, he has written and produced merchandising manuals and videos.

Leathers has also assisted USDA in rewriting the uniform meat identity standards for pork. And he is credited with developing America's Cut as well as two other trademarked cuts of pork, Chef's Prime and Chef's Prime Filets. The cuts are now selling in 20,000 retail stores and in 30,000 restaurants.

With typical intensity, Leathers claims "The Other White Meat" campaign has been "the most revolutionary thing that has ever happened to any meat product."

No matter how you slice it, the marketing effort has been successful. About 82% of targeted consumers indeed now recognize pork as the other white meat.

The next step in the pork council's agenda is "Think Pink," a strategy to educate consumers on cooking pork correctly to 160°F. A survey showed consumers overcook pork.

Also, consumers are learning that eight cuts of pork fall somewhere between the fat content of a skinless chicken breast and that of a skinless chicken thigh. That's a tremendous change.

Leathers remembers working on the kill floor alongside leaf-lard

*Joe Leathers of the National Pork Producers Council urges retailers to romanticize pork.*



PHOTO: JOE LINK

pullers. Men built like Arnold Schwarzenegger stood on the assembly line, reached inside the carcass, and pulled out the lard.

"That job is no longer around because the hog is that much leaner," Leathers says. "Twenty years ago, the pork producers 'leaned' the hog by 50%. [According to] recent data, they leaned it another 31%."

He gives credit where credit is due. "It's all because of producers' management as to why these hogs are coming to market leaner than ever."

But he still has a bone of contention with producers. "We're going to have to raise a hog that's more consistent," he says. "We can't have hogs going to market at 200 pounds one day and 275 the next."

Mostly, Leathers is proud of the entire industry. It's about time pork had a romantic champion like the Samurai of Swine. As he points out, John Wayne never rode off into the sunset with a herd of hogs.

*Nancy Dorman-Hickson*

## LETTERS

### Hard Choices for Extension

Your article "Is the Extension Service Becoming History?" in the September issue raises some significant questions. Unfortunately, there is little agreement on the answers.

I would submit that Extension is continuing to serve agriculture in a significant way. Some suggest that the future of agriculture depends on those outside traditional ag circles. If so, Extension has a tremendous opportunity and challenge to link all segments of our society in mutually beneficial ways.

The Extension model that works so well in this country is the envy of the world. It can be of even greater benefit if supported and allowed the freedom to adjust to change.

I was pleased to see that *Progressive Farmer* readers do continue to value Extension, as reported in your survey. Thank you for acknowledg-

ing that Extension provides information for many of your articles. Often, critics miss that aspect when they suggest that they can get all [the information] they need from reading publications or from the local farm supply store. They miss the point that Extension provides technical data and training for a large segment of our ag support industry.—C. Wayne Jordan, director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Georgia, Athens, Ga.

Your article in the September issue reminded me of the many pro-and-con discussions of recent years concerning the future of Cooperative Extension. I was a member of the Extension Futures Task Force that met in Memphis and heard Pat Sullivan, the farmer quoted in your article, speak in support of Extension.

I also heard (then and now) strong support for the idea of Extension bringing the university to the people. In fact, *Business Week* (April 6,



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