

## The Mystery behind the Meat

Food Services' fare travels far, from cow to plate

Story by Stephen Wells • Photos by Cariño Casas



**TOP RIGHT:** Food Services employee Nikki Johnson serves students spaghetti and meatballs during lunch Tuesday.

**ABOVE:** Food Services employee Betty Hickman strains a vat of spaghetti during preparation of lunch Tuesday.

For 100 years, the auxiliary Texas A&M Department of Food Services has been expanding the belt-lines of an army of students.

As students flock to the dining halls for another meal, they are less apt to think about where their food came from than whether or not they dare ask the lady behind the counter for a double-serving of chicken tenders.

Students who have fun dining on campus are partaking in the result of hours of labor and years of preparation.

The journey of a burger begins with a single grunt, as a production cow spits out another calf for feeding and eventual slaughter.

Dr. Jeff Savell, a professor of animal science, said the life of a food animal can be broken down into discrete steps.

"Calves that are weaned from the cows could be backgrounded on a pasture, and when they reach a certain weight, they are sent to a feed yard, usually up in the Panhandle," Savell said.

After months of fattening, the animal is ready to be "processed," or killed, and then sliced into crude cuts of meat.

"The big processing plants are all near the areas of production," Savell

said. "They harvest the animal and convert it to a carcass. Some of the larger ones can slaughter four to five thousand head of cattle in two shifts."

Mike Bell, a sophomore animal science major, said there is no dirtier work than a processing plant.

"If you've ever worked with a couple of pounds of hamburger meat, multiply that by a thousand and you get a worker in a plant," Bell said. "You stand in front of the conveyor belt, and every second, this piece of cow comes down the line, and you make some cuts on it. You smell like blood at the end of the day."

This level of production is essential to feed a group the size of the A&M student body. Last semester, the dining halls on campus served up 30,000 pounds of hamburger meat, 20,000 briskets and 150,000 burgers.

All of this food was prepared and delivered by the Department of Food Services, or more specifically, the Commissary on Agronomy Road.

Ron Beard, director of the Department of Food Services, said a massive volume of food product enters and leaves the Commissary every week.

"A lot of the food students eat

comes from plants in California and Mexico," Beard said. "The food moves from there to Houston or Austin daily, then gets trucked up here. A truck may have 720 cases of food, for 40,000 pounds worth of goods."

The Department of Food Services, in order to cut costs for students on a budget, operates on a bidding process.

The company that meets quality and cost demands is the one putting food in the students' mouths.

"Like most state agencies, we operate on a bidding process," Beard said. "Our bid goes out on the Web for the required 21 days, and we ask for bids on a specific product such as a grade of meat or type of produce."

The Commissary is, essentially, a combination warehouse and butcher shop. Primal cuts, basic cuts of meat, are trimmed down and processed on the premises, and vegetables are cut to meet the dining hall demands.

Turnaround time for vegetables is about three days, while, for meat and dry goods it is several days.

For anyone who is nodding their head in agreement, secure in their prediction the food must be days old, Food Services is following standard

procedure.

"Storage time varies from meat to meat and for cuts of meat," Savell said. "A standard time to wait is 14 to 21 days for the aging of beef before it goes to an eating establishment. The wait improves the flavor and tenderness of the meat."

The flavor and the tenderness of the meat comes from the processes that occur after death in the animal. The toughest meat is the meat from a freshly killed animal.

As a substitute for the dining halls, many students go to some franchise establishments on campus.

Even in the warm glow of the Whataburger in the Underground, students are, in a way, eating from Food Services.

"All of the food franchises, including the ones at Sbis, are there because of a licensing agreement," Beard said. "Under the agreement, the university owns and operates the establishment and pays a fee to use the name."

"For example, for Stone Willie's Pizza, we are paying them to use the name and buy our food from their sources, but it is still operated by Food Services."

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