

# MYSTERY MEAT

*by Linda Fiveson*

I've always been one who liked surprises but "the buck has to stop somewhere" and for me it's with food. I want to know what I'm eating. What about you? Do you always know what you're putting in your mouth???

Mystery meat may not be something you've thought about a lot before but you might reconsider after you digest some of the facts and information about mystery it. Simply stated, mystery meat is a term used for meat that can't be identified by species or animal part... What that boils down to (before you even put it in the pot to boil...or pan to broil...) is animal waste. That means lips, snouts, guts, gizzards and other parts such as these – ones many of us consider to be garbage.

For those of you who haven't lost their appetites yet and are still with me, there's more! I mean, don't expect to see the words "mystery meat" in writing. You won't find them on packages of meat at the butcher shop or listed on labels in the supermarket. It's not like you have to be a meat detective – you just have to know what to look for because it's a little more than "meets (meats?) the eye"...

Mystery meat is the result of a process called mechanical separation. This is a process that forces animal carcasses and bones that still have meat attached into a sieve or similar device that separates the bone from edible meat tissue and produces a paste-like meat product. This method is used with many different types of meat and poultry and may contain bone and skin with attached fat. The end result is malleable meat that resembles play dough; you can mix, mush or mold it any shape you want.

The use of machinery began in the fish processing industry in Japan in the late 1940's. A decade later the United States started using hand tools to remove any scraps that were left on carcasses and minimize waste. Then, in the 1960's machines were developed so this could be done more efficiently. This was beneficial to both businesses and consumers since meat products could be offered and sold at lower prices. As technology advanced the machinery used to separate meat from bones did too. This process became known as mechanically separated meat and is sometimes referred to as MSM, mechanically recovered meat, mechanically reclaimed meat and highly processed meat.

Now it's time to "meet your meat" so let's talk about where mystery meat has been hiding. Barbeque season may not be the most sensitive time to "take the lid off the pot" but health comes first – ALWAYS!

What if someone were to ask about the hot dogs on your grill? Did you buy the package that seemed the most nutritionally sound or the one with the lowest price tag?

Despite long time scrutiny and efforts to raise public awareness that hot dogs are not a healthy or nutritious food choice, their popularity continues to grow. This can best be seen during barbeque season and at ball games. It is estimated that Americans consume over 20 billion hot dogs a year!

Hot dogs can be made from beef, pork, turkey, chicken or a combination of these meats. Packages labeled "beef" are precisely that – "beef" but those labeled "meat" are usually a mixture and the specific meats used must be listed on the label. This beef or meat includes meat that has been mechanically separated. Fillers such as cereal and soy are added to help expand and bind the mixture. Hot dogs have a high salt content and contain many preservatives too. Those called "skinless" have had their casing removed after cooking; others remain in the thin skin. If the casings are made from an animal different than the filling, that must be reflected on the label. This means if a beef hot dog has a casing made of pork, both must be on the label. As a side note, sausages resemble hot dogs closely and share most of their ingredients and characteristics.

Mechanically separated meat is not just in hot dogs and sausages. Remember – it's known as mystery meat so where else can it be lurking? Could it be in the lunch your child is being served in school or your parent in the nursing home? Could it possibly be in your refrigerator or between the two slices of bread you turned in to a sandwich? In the chicken nuggets you just "heat and eat"?

Eating processed meat imposes health risks we need to take seriously. It's not just looking at what parts of what animal we're ingesting but also what's been added to the meat. You might stand in front of a display of chopped meats and wonder what the differences are. The one that's labeled hamburger is

meat alone but the one that's labeled hamburger patties can contain mechanically separated meat. So can Salisbury steak which is chopped meat smothered in gravy.

The best and most expensive types of deli and luncheon meats are freshly prepared and not processed. Examples include roast beef and turkey made from whole cuts of meat that have been simply seasoned, cooked and sliced. It should be no surprise that they're the healthiest too!

Processed meats pale in comparison (and in a literal sense, they actually gain color from some of the additives and preservatives!) Examples of these meats include bologna, salami, liverwurst and olive loaf. They're made from pieces of real meat, mechanically separated meat and sometimes animal by products too. That can mean parts like lips, snouts and intestines... UGH!

Long gone are the days of preserving foods naturally. Today, thousands of chemicals and additives are used to process food and preserve food, enhancing their flavor, color, texture and shelf life. Some of them might seem beneficial because they can provide protection from bacteria but the truth is they bring more harm than good.

In the computer world spam is another word for junk mail. In the food world, spam is another word for junk meal! Check out the label if you're doubtful. Spam is made from chopped pork shoulder, ham meat, sugar, salt, water and sodium nitrite. I suppose there was some rationale (though I can't imagine what it might have been) for considering this meat in wartime when fresh meat wasn't readily available. But now? Today?

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Think about these things the next time you're at the local store or deli counter and are tempted by the jar of cellophane-wrapped dried meat sticks. They may be called Slim Jim's but eating too many of them won't keep you too slim. I bet by this time you can guess that any meat in them has been mechanically separated. Guess what else? The main two ingredients are corn and wheat. They have plenty of sugar, salt and preservatives too. If you were to read the label carefully or research Slim Jim's even a little, I think you'd feel totally justified asking, "where's the beef?"

We get fooled by many things in life but food shouldn't be one of them. Look at the expiration date – if it's one we won't even get to for another year or so think about how it can possibly be good for you. It has to be chock full of chemicals! Speaking of chemicals reminds me of the "bacos" or bacon bits often found at salad bars. You may think they're pieces of crumbled bacon and perhaps sometimes they are but more often than not, they are made from chemicals and preservatives and contain no real bacon at all! Many of us love bacon but it's not the greatest choice either; it's highly processed and cured and it's also loaded with fat and salt.

Fish shouldn't be exempt from scrutiny either. Why not double check the fish stick and fish cake labels? Or the ones on gefilte fish? Of course, there's imitation crab meat too. The word imitation is the first clue that that this product is not "real" and if you check you'll see it's definitely been processed. Imitation crab meat is made from inexpensive white fish like Pollock or cod, both of which have mild tastes and can be easily made to taste like crab meat. It's ground and made into a paste by adding water, starch, sugar and artificial colors and flavors.

Maybe keeping our eyes open will help keep our mouths closed...until we're ready to eat wisely? Changing the way you eat doesn't always happen so fast. You usually have to change the way you think first and that isn't always so easy. I hope this article serves as a wake up call for those who need one!

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