

Meat Quality in Kosovo and Liaison with Consumers

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to provide a professional analysis and reflection of the quality of meat and its products and its impact on consumer selection, we should also mention that meat and its products as one of the main elements in the consumer table has a special importance in economic analysis both in terms of quality and customer satisfaction as well as in terms of price and economic well-being. We should also mention that it is not in vain to say that regular and quality food is the safest guarantee for a consolidated health, but not to forget that it can not always be taken into account and added care that what we consume in different places like in social organizations or different parties. But food safety should be a vital issue and a priority over priority because the food quality refers to some specific characteristics such as nutrient content as well as organoleptic properties mainly related to the taste and processing of food, packaging and others. Also, do not forget to mention that the food must be suitable for consumption and not to result in any way in the consequences and to harm the health of the consumer. So it is primary to pay special attention to the risks we may encounter in food products in advance to be attentive and prepared for the risks and consequences or diseases born of food, a regular nutrition and quality food reflects half of the health of the human body.

Keywords: Food, Quality, Meat, Consumer, Economy, Family.

1. Introduction

The basic food that the citizens of Kosovo eat is meat, while the most favorite turns out to be the consumption of chicken meat. According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, this product accounts for 20 percent of total food consumption. Food in Kosovo is dominated by meat, bread, milk, cheese, eggs and cereals, which contribute more than half of food consumption. Then come the vegetables and non-alcoholic drinks. So, starting from this, there is a need for the best quality of these products in order to best meet the needs of consumers and the quality of products to meet the preferences of consumers who focus on the quality of products, food as well as the economic side of their use, finally the price (Kosovo Agency of Statistics).

Even the import data from Kosovo Customs show that within a year over 40 million kilograms of meat of all types enter Kosovo on average. During 2018, the import of meat was 45 million kilograms of all kinds in a total value of 64 million euros. Whereas, from the beginning of 2019 until July, about 31 million kilograms worth 44 million euros were imported in Kosovo (Customs of the Republic of Kosovo). The countries from which most meat imports during 2018, are Brazil, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Just from Brazil, our country has imported over 18 million kilograms of meat. Frozen beef accounts for the largest share of meat imports from Brazil with 5.4 million kilograms, followed by chicken meat with 4 million kilograms and chicken breast with 3 million kilograms (Customs of the Republic of Kosovo).

2. Literature Review

Meat Quality in Kosovo

Kosovo citizens are thought to have constant doubts about the quality of the meat they consume, while the Kosovo Food and Veterinary Agency (KFVA) guarantees that meat and its by-products, which are imported and consumed in Kosovo, are safe for consumption.

But despite what is said by KVFA only within the first three months of this year about 30 thousand kilograms of meat have been destroyed. The state of meat quality in Kosovo is not satisfactory, as the conditions in which the meat is processed do not meet the basic sanitary conditions and also the import of meat from other countries, some of them as suspicious where we have had scandals such as the case with the state of Belgium. Also from the state of Brazil, which is one of the main countries from which Kosovo is supplied with meat products. The regulation of the legal infrastructure, as well as the stricter controls in the warehouses where these products are processed, would affect the improvement of the existing situation as well as the increase of the consumers' self-confidence for the use of meat products.

Insufficient controls by relevant institutions and low engagement of veterinary inspectors and food technology experts affect the low level of quality of meat products. The quality of food imported into our country is quite worrying. Citizens continue to be endangered separately by the quality of meat. Some time ago, KVFA discovered that spoiled meat was entering Kosovo from Belgium, but spoiled meat is still being sold in our markets. Hundreds of kilograms have been confiscated recently. The occurrence of these scandals has somehow eroded consumer confidence in the purchase of meat products but still the amount of meat traded within the country remains large.

This condition affects the preferences of consumers, who feel endangered in the purchase of meat and meat products.

Consumption of this type of meat imported from some Latin American countries and some European countries is very harmful to human organization. Kosovar consumers are little or not at all aware of the dangers posed by this type of meat. The responsibility remains with the importer and the inspectorate which deals with the control of meat and its by-products. Every food product that enters the customs points of Kosovo must be checked by an expert in this field.

Meat production in Kosovo faces many difficulties, one of the most important being the large number of small farms and the reduction in the number of livestock. As a result of this situation we have significant quantities of imports of meat and its products from the countries of the region as well as from EU countries and other countries.

In order to improve the current situation and overcome the difficulties that aggravate this productivity, favorable policies should be created to strengthen this sub-sector that contributes to improving the standard of living in rural areas, directly affects food and nutrition security, and at the same time offers the possibility of faster return of revenues to small producers.

HACCP is a system for identifying, assessing and controlling food safety risks, which is based on several principles:

- Conducting risk analysis
- Defining critical control points
- Setting critical limits
- Applying corrective actions
- Establishing the verification procedure. Establishing the procedure of keeping, preserving and documenting the procedure.



HACCP is a management system in which food safety is driven through the analysis, biological, chemical and physical control of hazards starting from the raw material, insurance and storage, marketing, distribution and consumption of the final product. HACCP is intended

to be applied in all segments of the food industry. The seven aforementioned HACCP principles are widely accepted by government agencies, trade and industry associations worldwide.

HACCP – initials

- Hazard = Danger (Risk)
- Analysis = Analysis
- Critical = Criticism (Critic)
- Control = Control (Check), - Point = Point

The production of safe foods requires that the HACCP system be built on a solid foundation of essential programs. Every segment of the food industry must provide the necessary conditions while under control. This is achieved through the application of necessary programs of the type of production manuals.

These practices are considered very important for the development and implementation of effective HACCP plans, as they provide the basic conditions for the production of safe and healthy foods. The success of the HACCP system depends significantly on the level and direction of education and training. Specific training activities related to the above program should include instructions and descriptive procedures for employee responsibility. In conclusion, effective training is an important task for the successful implementation of HACCP.

Definition - HACCP is a rational, systematic and scientifically based way of ensuring food, health safety, allowing us to:

- Identification and assessment of health risks at all phases of the process of production, processing and distribution of food.
- Timely specification of measures to prevent and control identified risks.
- Ensure effective implementation of preventive measures

Local companies dealing with meat processing and meat products

Beef is the type of meat that is widely consumed in Kosovo, along with lamb and other livestock categories. This sub-sector is dominated by small farms, while the number of semi-commercial and commercial farms is quite small.

In recent years in our country, there have been significant structural changes in livestock farms. Farmers with mixed livestock farms, seeing the tendency of increasing the price of beef have shown their interest to focus on farms profiled for fattening. Thanks to a subsidy and grant support, the number of specialized farms for fattening cattle and dairy cows is growing.

In the existing livestock fund of cattle, 55.6% is the share of dairy cows. Of this number, 156,062 heads are slaughtered per year. It is estimated that with this rate of production and average consumption per capita of 21.2 kg / year, Kosovo manages to cover 69.8% of the local market demand for beef, while to meet local needs continues to import about 30% of the quantity of meat and its products. The value of total production of this livestock category based on the calculations of economic accounts, according to production prices was 68.2 mil. €. In Kosovo, there are several commercial entities which deal with the activity of meat production and processing. Their main challenge is the high import of meat from foreign countries, which affects the reduction of demand for domestic products as in terms of prices they are lower.

According to MAFRD estimates, for the period 2005-2013 an average of 160,384 head of cattle was slaughtered per year. The largest number of slaughter was done in 2011 (172,433 head of cattle) 3, while the lowest in 2009 (152,394 heads).

MEKA Halal Food

In 1992, the company MEKA starts its production activities by launching sausage, and later starts the production of other products such as; sausages, bacon, pate, pasta, beef slices, as well as ready-made canned dishes. In 2015 in Geneva, Switzerland, MEKA was awarded by BID with the Gold Medal for High Product Quality and Management. MEKA wins this award in competition with major world companies for meat processing and production. Certified by an international auditor with HACCP, a

regulation which serves food safety, and which company MEKA has been certified for many years now with this regulation, so that the products are as safe as possible for all consumers.

Products that enjoy an international reputation for high quality and an irresistible taste. Products that are consumed by different target groups, as they are considered very healthy products. You can find all the positive features in one place only in MEKA products.

Buçuku

It is another local company which deals with the production and processing of meat products also verified with local and international standards Halal, ISO and HACCP.

Apetit Group

The company has been established since 1983, starting with its primary activity, the marketing of beef and meat products. At this time the company, among the few in the country, achieves the epithet for quality and unique products that will later become part of the traditional culture in the country and beyond. With the beginning of the new millennium, Appetit Company reaches the target as the largest producer in the Kosovo market. What underlies the foundations of this success, is the careful selection of meat for production, investment in the latest technology and especially the maximum hygienic care in preserving the values of the product (licensed by HACCP).

Apetit Group owns its 087KS slaughterhouse licensed by the relevant institution, then the meat processing industry and warehouse. This chain, from the slaughter of live animals that is absolutely done respecting the HALLALL and HACCP norms until the finalization of the product, leaves nothing to be desired in terms of the values of meat and its products. Appetit Group, also cooperates with prestigious international companies, importing among others beef, chicken, and fish, which products are stored in the factory and then supplied to markets according to consumer demand. Particular attention is paid to the import of these products, which must be equipped with adequate certificates according to EU standards.

The amount of beef exported by Kosovar producers is very small compared to imports. The amount of meat exported was generally oriented to four countries in the B. Herzegovina region 9,960 kg in 2006, increasing exports to 22,989 kg in 2008 and decreasing again in 2010 to 691 kg. 1,500 kg was exported to Macedonia in 2008, 253 kg to Albania in 2012 and 30,000 kg to Serbia in 2010. The highest value was in 2008 (€ 104,645) for the quantity of exported meat (22,989 kg) categorized as beef "Front quarters", exported to Albania and B. Herzegovina, where at the same time this is the most quantity the largest ever exported.

The price of meat and its impact on consumption

Comparing with other Western Balkan countries, the level of meat prices is cheaper and more acceptable. After Albania, Macedonia is ranked for affordable prices, where meat costs approximately half as cheap as in European Union countries.

Unlike Albania, the most expensive meat costs in Kosovo, where the price is slightly higher (13%) than in Albania. The most expensive prices are considered Switzerland. Meat is more expensive in Switzerland, where the price level is (2.4) times more expensive than in the rest of Europe. As for prices of meat, price plays a key role in the selection of products to consumers, where a positive impact has resulted that products with higher prices, gain confidence or warranty more easily to consumers in terms of product safety. Also products or food products with higher prices generally include more features such as: Quality, design, wrapping, packaging, product longevity, which things make them attract the attention of consumers.

3. The Relationship between Meat Quality and Consumer Choice

Meat products imported from abroad

Kosovo is recognized more as an importer of meat products than its producer. Last year, 40 million kg of meat of various types were imported. According to Customs data, during 2017, meat entered Kosovo from the Belgian state.

The country from which most meat is imported is Brazil with more than 13 million kg of meat. The United States of America were not left bad either, where, according to the data over 7 and a half million meats were imported (7,551,613.64). In addition to these two countries, supplies of meat products are also made from Paraguay, where within the last year, more than 776 thousand kg of meat was imported (766,222.56). Citizens have also consumed meat from Serbia. In the year we left, about 20 thousand kg of meat (or 19,899, 45) were imported to Kosovo.

How safe it is to consume all this amount of meat is a dilemma after the recent scandal with spoiled meat that for 12 years has been stored for human consumption. As local production cannot meet local demand for beef, Kosovo also imports a large number of live cattle, most of which end up in slaughterhouses. This is due to the large meat deficit in our country.

In the period '12 -'15 the average amount of chicken meat import was 34,357 tons, the highest amount was in 2015, respectively 7.5% higher than the average during the period '12 -'15, while the highest the lowest was in 2012 at 31,899 tonnes. During this period about 70% of the amount of chicken meat was imported from the United States and Brazil while from other countries, it is worth mentioning Italy and Germany, countries from which about 9% was imported and the rest from other countries.

Inadequate conditions in which meat is processed and impact on consumers

The question is how it is being checked and whether the meat is safe

During February, the Inspectorate of the Municipality of Mitrovica found 1.1 tons of spoiled meat in two large businesses in this municipality. After finding 573 kg of rotten meat in the refrigerators of a business, the inspectors also found the premises where the meat is kept and cut into this business. And when it was found that the captured meat was rotten and had to be disposed of, he put a cleaning truck there, which usually collects garbage from the city. More than half a ton of meat was dumped there, which, according to inspectors, had endangered the health of consumers.

Products of animal origin are subject to control by veterinary inspectors. Border control procedures for all products from each incoming country are the same. It is mandatory that the accompanying documentation of shipments to border inspection points is original and in some cases it is verified in cooperation with the competent food authority of the country where the product was produced (country of origin). Hygiene of food products, especially meat, is a complex and very important area, it is based on the standards and the basic rules by the competent authorities as well as the rules of internal hygiene of meat products in the workplace. The countries from which Kosovo has the most imports continue to be the countries of the European Union, USA, Brazil, etc.

Scandals with rotten meat

Recall that in the spring of 2018 there was a lot of discussion about the quality of meat, after it became public that during 2017 a large amount of this product came spoiled from Belgium to Kosovo. This scandal over the quality of meat had initially erupted in Belgium and after investigations, it was discovered that a company there had operated in unacceptable sanitary conditions, and that it had manipulated the contents of the meat. This meat and its products originating from Belgium were suspected to have been consumed by the citizens of Kosovo. On these suspicions, the companies that imported this meat were also closed.

Rotten meat in the warehouse of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK)

Doubts about the quality of meat have been persistent in Kosovo. Even this year, in many cases, large quantities of spoiled meat have been destroyed. The latest rotten meat scandal has also involved the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK).

This scandal with rotten meat in the BIK warehouse, which was distributed to families in need for the Eid al-Adha holiday, is still under investigation by the Basic Prosecution of Pristina. This prosecution has issued an authorization to the Kosovo Police, respectively the Directorate for Investigation of Economic Crimes and Corruption to collect additional materials and facts in this case. 21 tons of meat kept in the warehouse of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK), located in Veternik, Prishtina, has been destroyed

by the Food and Veterinary Agency (FVA). This meat is suspected to have been distributed to families in need in honor of the feast of Eid al-Adha.

The FVA verified that this meat was spoiled and should not be consumed. The FVA found that there was no refrigeration capacity in the ICK warehouse and that the freezing was not done on time.

While the FVA Inspectors say: *the Veterinary Inspectors of the Food and Veterinary Agency immediately carried out the control of the warehouse. There they encountered a quantity of 21 tons of beef. After a detailed inspection, the inspectors assessed that initially the meat stored there was not frozen in time.*

Product characteristics which are crucial in the selection and behavior of the consumer

Consumer behavior has to do with mental and physical acts including their motives and causes related to the orientation, respectively the purchase and use, maintenance of goods and services. Consumer decision making is a derivative of the influences of many factors such as:

- Environmental impact (culture, social classes, reference groups, etc.)
- Situational factors such as purchase circumstances, consumption,
- Marketing strategies.

According to Breakenridge (2001), many brand influences on consumer behavior have been identified, which are as follows:

- Brands create ownership in their utility.
- Brands are unique and differentiated.
- Brands maintain a personal relationship in the sales process.
- Brands are associated with a clear set of values.
- Brands meet needs and expectations.

Brands influence consumer choices, as they are more than a logo and the elements combined with a brand, generate an emotional connection with the consumer, describing the consumer personality in the purchase of the brands.

Designers develop colors, material shapes, and attitudes to function and flood to bring the brand to life. Given these features, consumers create close brand connections in their minds. It is the emotional connection, the brand personality and the whole consumer experience, which by coming together influence consumer behavior.

Quality is one of the main tools of product positioning by marketers, defining it in two dimensions, in a level and sustainability (*Kotler, Wong, Saunders, Armstrong 2005*).

Product quality lies in the ability of a product to perform its functions, it includes overall product durability, reliability, ease of operation, repair and other valuable attributes. Although some of these attributes can be measured objectively, seen from a marketing perspective, quality must be measured in terms of buyer perceptions (*Kotler 1999*). Over the last few decades, special attention has been paid to quality enhancement and this has created a global shift in companies' focus on quality. Japanese firms have practiced "total quality management" (TQM), which is a continuous effort to always improve the process for product quality during various stages (*Otis, Port 1991*). According to *Ceku (2010)*, by product quality we mean the ability of a product or service to satisfy the (expressed or potential) needs of the user.

Product packaging

Researchers point out that about 70 percent of what consumers see in sales units is packaging. Packaging should create trust and security. Successful packaging can meet these requirements in many ways. Packaging can be influenced through the clever use of color schemes, their size, the quality of constituent materials, their unique shapes or their weight (*Kotler 2008*). Packaging is defined as the activity of designing and manufacturing product holders or wrappers. Like other brand elements the packaging also has a long history. In earlier times people used the leaves and skins of animals to cover and hold food and water. Glassware first appeared in Egypt 2000 years before our Common Era. In the period of the French Emperor Napoleon, ways were invented to preserve food with the first method of using a vacuum in the packaging of products.

Seen from the perspective of the firm and the consumer, packaging must achieve a number of objectives:

- Identify the brand,
- Convey descriptive and persuasive information,
- Facilitate product transportation and protection,
- Help with home storage,
- Help in consuming the product.

Country of origin of the product

According to Saydan (2013), country of origin is one of the most important factors influencing decision-making in consumer purchases and is defined as part of the consumer's subjective perception about a product. The country of origin of the product provides an important element in relation to the beliefs, ideas and impressions of the consumer, before he makes a decision to buy. The country of origin, which is attached to the label, with the inscription "Made in" or in Albanian "produced in", has been used, as a powerful function in the development of global competition in order to increase sales. Among the first scholars to conceptualize the role of country of origin was Nagashima in 1970, who defined the image that consumers associate with country of origin as: *"The imagination, the reputation, the stereotype that the producer and the consumer attach to the phenomenon of the country of origin. The image is created with variables such as product presentation, national characteristics, political and economic environment, history and traditions."*

Even in meat products in this case the origin of the product plays a very important role in consumer decision making and in the selection of the type of product.

4. Research method

Primary data during the research of this topic were obtained from the survey of citizens of the Republic of Kosovo in four different cities (Pristina, Gjakova, Peja, Mitrovica), while secondary data were obtained from relevant companies dealing with these activities including here Buçuku company, Apetit Group, and Meka Halal Food. During the drafting of this paper, a wide range of literature has been used that has to do with the field of this paper. The data published on the Internet were also used.

Results of Analysis and Interpretation of data obtained from the Research

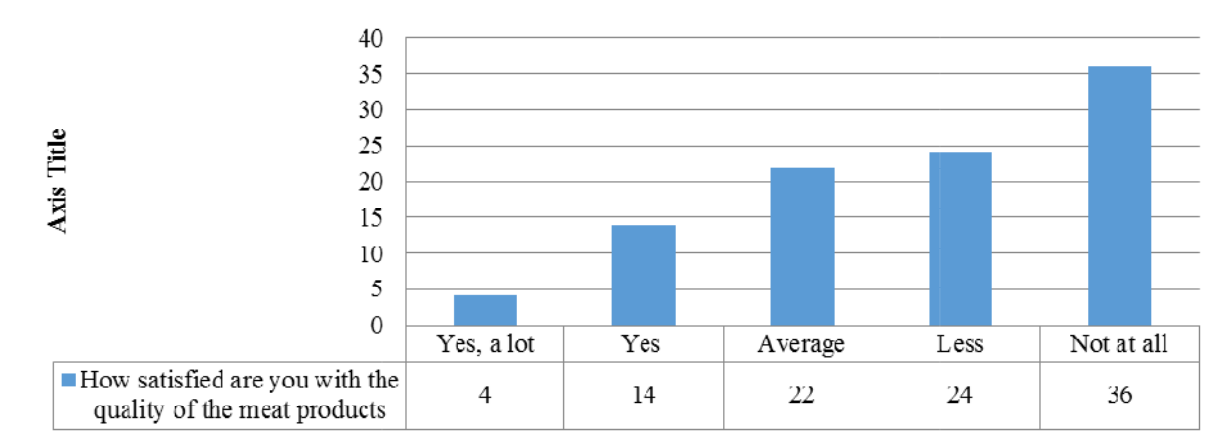
Research survey process

During the survey process, 100 people were surveyed by filling out the question form for academic purposes in the field of consumer access to the quality of meat products in the Republic of Kosovo. The survey process was conducted in 4 different cities of Kosovo such as *Prishtina, Mitrovica, Peja, and Gjakova*.

5. Findings and interpretation of findings

A very important element is the opinions of the respondents regarding the quality of meat and meat products in order to create a reflection from the perspective of the consumer regarding the state of the quality of the products taken in the analysis. The next question therefore has to do with how satisfied consumers are with the quality of the meat products they consume as an integral part of their daily table.

The opinions of the respondents regarding this issue are of special importance as through them, we gain a more realistic reflection of what we have taken for analysis in this research paper regarding the quality of these products and consumer requirements as interconnected elements. After presenting the percentage of answers given through the following diagram, the evaluation of answers will be given and their correlation with the situation of the analyzed sector.



Graph 1. Answers to the question how satisfied are you with the quality of meat products

As it can be seen from the diagram, we notice that consumers in general are not satisfied with the quality of meat and its products where the answer is located „Not at all”with 36% of respondents giving this answer followed by the answer „Less”with 24%, where then 22% of respondents answered that they are moderately satisfied with the quality of meat products and then 14% of respondents stated that they are satisfied, where 4% of the total number stated that they are very satisfied.

This shows that consumers are not satisfied with this situation and that measures should be taken by the relevant authorities to improve the situation so that Kosovar consumers feel safe when buying meat products and increase confidence in these products by taking all preventive and punitive measures with economic entities that deal with these activities.

Another very important factor in the consumption of meat products is their price as this directly affects the pocket of consumers who, despite the small material income, still consume significant amounts of meat and its products.

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