



*From Pen to Plate:
Carcass Composition
of Market Hogs*

*Dr. Jodi Sterle
Assistant Professor and State Extension Swine Specialist
Texas A&M University*

Do you know why we pick heavily muscled hogs to win in the showing? Where bacon comes from? Why it is important not to inject a pig in the ham, or rear area? Many of reasons why we do certain things in regards to showpigs relate to the end product that we are producing; **not** the 255 pound animal, but the **meat** from that animal that is going to be eaten by someone, maybe even yourself.

The dressing percent of a hog is approximately 72%. This means that after the viscera, or intestines, heart, lungs, trachea, etc. are removed, the remaining organs, muscle and bone accounts for 72% of the carcass. Hogs have a higher dressing percentage than the other red meat species because their skin is left on (they are dehaired only), they have a larger amount of subcutaneous fat (underneath the skin) than cattle or sheep and they are monogastrics (simple stomachs, like humans, while cattle and sheep are ruminants and the four-compartment stomach makes up a larger proportion of their body weight). The higher the dressing percentage, the more valuable the carcass. Although literally every part of the hog carcass is used in some fashion (from insulin for diabetics to skin for tanning into leather to edible organs, or "everything but the oink!"), the most valuable part of the carcass is included in the 72% that is left.

The hog carcass is divided into four lean cuts. These include the ham (butt area, which makes up ~22% of the carcass), the loin (commonly referred to as the "top"), the Boston butt (which is actually the top of the shoulder) and the picnic shoulder (the lower portion of the shoulder). These cuts are the heaviest muscled and we harvest products such as hams, chops, roasts and more from these four cuts. The other cuts include the jowl and the hock where some stew meat and other smaller pieces of lean can be harvested; and the side, or belly, where we get bacon. Obviously, the more muscular the hog, the more product that we can harvest from the animal. Many slaughter plants will pay producers based on the average amount of muscle in a group of hogs, instead of just on liveweight, giving a definite advantage to those producers who are supplying heavily muscled, lean hogs.

Although the amount of product that we can harvest from an animal is important, the **quality** counts too. A number of things can affect pork quality. How we handle the animals prior to slaughter can have a great affect on the quality of the meat. Stress, both from transport and rough handling as well as from the stress gene, can cause the meat to be pale, soft and exudative (watery). More water is lost out of the muscles during storage, and therefore, the meat will dry out during cooking. During a recent trip to the grocery store, I found a number of packages of pork chops that had exuded water into the bottom of the styrofoam tray that they were in. Had I purchased these and cooked them as I normally do, I would not have been satisfied with the product, and may not buy it again. It is our responsibility to produce a product that the consumer will be happy with. The ideal color for pork is grayish pink. Flecks of intramuscular fat, or marbling, add flavor and juiciness when the fat cooks out. As consumers, we tend to avoid intramuscular fat for "health" reasons, but in reality, it is that marbling that gives meat its palatability. Ironically, the marbling is the last type of fat to be deposited in the body, meaning that an animal will fatten around its organs, in between muscles, and underneath the skin **before** it adds marbling. This is an important thing to consider as we send these show pigs to market. Other things that detract from the quality of the pork include bruises and abscesses (either from rough handling or from improper use of injection needles), foreign objects (such as broken off needles), improper use and/or timing of animal health products (drugs) that can cause residues of those drugs to be left in the meat and severe stress during the slaughter process.

The next time you get ready to walk into the showing or sell a hog off of your place, ask yourself some questions: What is the quality of the meat will be produced from this hog? Have I done anything to jeopardize the safety or quality of this product? Am I producing a product that I would eat? If not, then what am I contributing to the swine industry? As consumers become more and more concerned about the safety and the wholesomeness of the food that they are consuming, we must take the proper steps to ensure both the quality and the safety of our product. This process begins with **you**, the producer.