The Surprising Reason “Pink Slime” Meat is Back

By Josh Sanburn

TIME

The attention was damning. In 2012, ABC News ran [an 11-segment investigation](http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/pink-slime-15873068) on a low-cost meat product critics called “pink slime,” a moniker *(name)* coined by a former USDA employee who argued the filler wasn’t really beef.

In an attempt to steer the public away from it, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver [“recreated”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wshlnRWnf30) it on his TV show by throwing beef scraps into a washing machine and dousing *(drenching it)* the results with ammonia. Soon, social media feeds were blanketed with photos supposedly of the product that made the meat look like soft-serve strawberry ice cream.

The backlash was intense. Though the USDA considers the product safe for human consumption, fast food giants like McDonald’s, Burger King and Taco Bell publicly renounced *(refused to recognize)* it and public schools around the country stopped serving it for lunch. By May 2012, Beef Products, Inc,, the South Dakota-based inventor of the product, was on the brink of collapse—[closing three of its four plants](http://time.com/5978/one-year-later-the-makers-of-pink-slime-are-hanging-on-and-fighting-back/) and laying off 700 employees.

1. What was the immediate response of fast food businesses after Jamie Oliver exposed pink slime?

**What a difference two years makes.**

On Aug. 18, BPI (Beef Products Inc.) reopened one of its shuttered plants. While production is nowhere near pre-freak-out levels, when the product BPI calls “lean finely textured beef” *(pink slime)* was estimated to be in 70% of the ground beef sold in the U.S., the company has been gradually regaining business. The reason is the same one that made finely textured beef successful in the first place: it’s cheap. And lower costs are particularly attractive to processors facing record high prices for ground beef. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the average price of ground beef in June was $3.88, up 14% from last year.

For that, you can thank the sustained drought that has gripped much of the American West and Great Plains, including cattle producing regions of Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska and Texas.

“The main issue is the drought,” says Dan Hale, an animal science professor at Texas A&M University. “A lot of the U.S., especially parts that raise cattle, have experienced a severe drought. And those animals are no longer available for producing calves that we can in turn generate for beef trimmings.”

In the summer of 2012, [more than 50% of the country](http://science.time.com/2012/07/18/how-the-drought-of-2012-will-make-your-food-more-expensive/) was considered in moderate or extreme drought. Those conditions forced ranchers to rush cows to slaughter, which led to fewer calves in the following years and lower head of cattle overall. Meanwhile, demand for beef kept rising, pushing prices higher along with it. With supply down, prices up and memories of the “pink slime” moment fading, the market for finely textured beef is growing again.

1. Why is BPI beginning to produce pink slime again?

BPI makes its product by spinning discarded beef scraps in a centrifuge to separate the lean, edible trimmings and then treating the result with ammonium hydroxide meant to kill food-borne pathogens like E. coli. Processors blend it with other cuts as a cost-saving measure and the product can account for as much as 10% of the meat in a package of ground beef.

“If you can utilize more of the animal, that helps mitigate some of the low supply numbers,” says Lee Schulz, an agricultural economics professor at Iowa State University.

1. Knowing that 10% of ground beef contains pink slime, would you still eat it? Why or why not?

**Look Inside a Chicken Nugget**

By James Hamblin

NPR

The chicken nugget can conjure purity. No buns, pickles, or bones. Not many carbs, apart from the breading. This is simplicity delivered economically, flightless birds, protein for the protein-hungry America of today—or, to followers of Michael Pollan, the [corn](http://www.amazon.com/The-Omnivores-Dilemma-Natural-History/dp/1594132054)-fed-meat-wrapped-in-[corn](http://www.amazon.com/The-Omnivores-Dilemma-Natural-History/dp/1594132054)-preserved-breading-dipped-in-[corn](http://www.amazon.com/The-Omnivores-Dilemma-Natural-History/dp/1594132054)-sweetened-goo kind of purity.

Richard D. deShazo, MD, is a distinguished professor of medicine and pediatrics at University of Mississippi Medical Center. He does not see purity. At least, not anymore.

“I was floored. I was astounded,” deShazo said of the moment he looked at a chicken nugget under a microscope.

Dr. deShazo has been concerned about the American diet for a while. Recently, he says, he "got a little curious about chicken nuggets" because "it almost seemed like they were habituating—that kids were [addicted](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/how-oreos-work-like-cocaine/280578/) to the chicken nuggets."

So he asked a colleague, pathologist [Steven Bigler](http://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343%2813%2900396-3/fulltext), MD, to see what's inside the nuggets by cutting them open "just like a human being [in an autopsy]."

Bigler and deShazo dissected two random chicken nuggets from different restaurants. They will not tell us which—because this is meant as an interesting reminder, not a Sinclarian exposé—beyond that they are "national fast-food chain restaurants near [the] academic health center in Jackson, Mississippi."

1. Looking at the image on the screen, what are some parts of the chicken that are visible under the microscope that you don’t think humans should be eating?

The nugget from the first restaurant (breading not included) was approximately 50 percent muscle. The other half was primarily fat, with some blood vessels and nerve, as well as "generous quantities of epithelium [from skin and visceral organs] and associated supportive tissue." That broke down overall to 56 percent fat, 25 percent carbohydrates, and 19 percent protein.

The nugget from the second restaurant was 40 percent skeletal muscle, as well as "generous quantities of fat and other tissue, including connective tissue and bone." That was 58 percent fat, 24 percent carbs, and 18 percent protein.

"We've taken a very healthy product—lean, white meat—and processed it, goo-ed it up with fat, sugar, and salt [in the breading]," he said. "Kids love that combination."

DeShazo and Bigler's conclusion: "Chicken nuggets are mostly fat, and their name is a misnomer." That is, "because the predominant components aren't chicken." At least, not in the sense that chicken implies meat (not fat and skin).

2) What are chicken nuggets primarily composed of?