

# What is Umami?



To be honest I had not heard of the term “umami” until I attended the Certified Hereford Beef (CHB) LLC-sponsored Farm to Fork Tour in April. The tour, which was organized for The Fresh Market meat managers and merchandisers, kicked off with a presentation by Sharla Huseman from the Kansas Beef Council. Huseman’s presentation focused on beef’s flavor advantage and creating crave among consumers. Huseman explained and demonstrated umami.

Umami (oo-MOM-ee) is the fifth taste receptor we recognize with our tongues — albeit a not well-known one. Umami is described as meaty and savory. It is the taste of glutamates — the salts of glutamic acid, an amino acid — and other small molecules called nucleotides. Umami describes the savory taste that you get when you eat products like mushrooms, tomatoes, aged cheeses or beef, or drink red wine.

The five tastes — sweet, salty, bitter, sour and umami — combine with other food perceptions such as aroma, texture, juiciness, mouth-feel and color to create flavor and give us the pleasurable (or disagreeable) sensations we have with food.

## The basics

Umami was discovered by a Japanese researcher named Kikumae Ikeda in 1932. The term is a combination of the Japanese root words “umai,” which means delicious or savory, and “mi,” which means the essence of.

The term and concept has been utilized by the wine community for many years. Recently it has gotten more recognition from food producers, professionals and communicators.

In 2001 the beef industry, through its \$1-per-head Beef Checkoff Program, conducted a flavor preference study to determine what flavors consumers preferred with beef, as well as what foods restaurant operators tended to pair with the product.

From the research came a greater understanding of umami. Through the checkoff a booklet called *Creating the Crave: The Beef Factor* was produced for food professionals in 2002. It was updated in early 2006.

“Beef is a great source of umami,” says Cattlemen’s Beef Board member Hope Huffman, a beef producer from McGregor, Texas, and chairman of the Joint New Product & Culinary Initiatives Committee. “And using

umami as a means for pairing beef properly with other foods is an important way we can better promote and present our product to consumers.

Dave Zino, who oversees the checkoff-funded Culinary Center in Chicago, agrees. “Combining foods with umami with the right other foods containing umami can create up to eight times the flavor,” says Zino. “By understanding umami, we can better create more flavorful, power-packed beef meals for consumers to experience.”

According to Huffman, intuitive knowledge of beef can take the industry only so far. “We recognize that consumers love beef, but knowing why they love beef is critically important,” she says. “By focusing on umami, we can better understand how beef works in the context of meal and menu planning. That’s one way we can build on the passion consumers have for our product and show them ways they can enjoy it even more.” Ripening, aging and fermenting foods dramatically increase the umami compounds. For example a green tomato has some umami, a hot house tomato has a little more, a vine ripe tomato has even more and a sun-dried tomato is very high due to the ripening process.

“Umami is the wow taste in beef,” Huseman says.

During her presentation she demonstrated the umami effect, having participants sample steak chunks dipped in different sauces. The variation in tastes was amazing.

## In this issue

This month we focus on the Certified Hereford Beef (CHB) LLC program. I was proud to be a Hereford breeder on the Farm to Fork tour, see page 44. Visiting with the meat managers and merchandisers about our product was exciting. They say their customers request Hereford beef. They can tell a difference compared to commodity Choice product and they keep coming back for more.

Another satisfied CHB LLC customer is Tommy Walters of Steakhouse Express. “I’ve tasted every breed of beef you can buy in North America,” Tommy says. “Hereford is the best you can get.” Learn more about Steakhouse Express on page 32.

Hope you enjoy this issue. We have a great product, with lots of umami, to promote. As Hereford breeders and enthusiasts let’s help CHB LLC staff spread the good word. **HW**