

MEAT PROCESSING

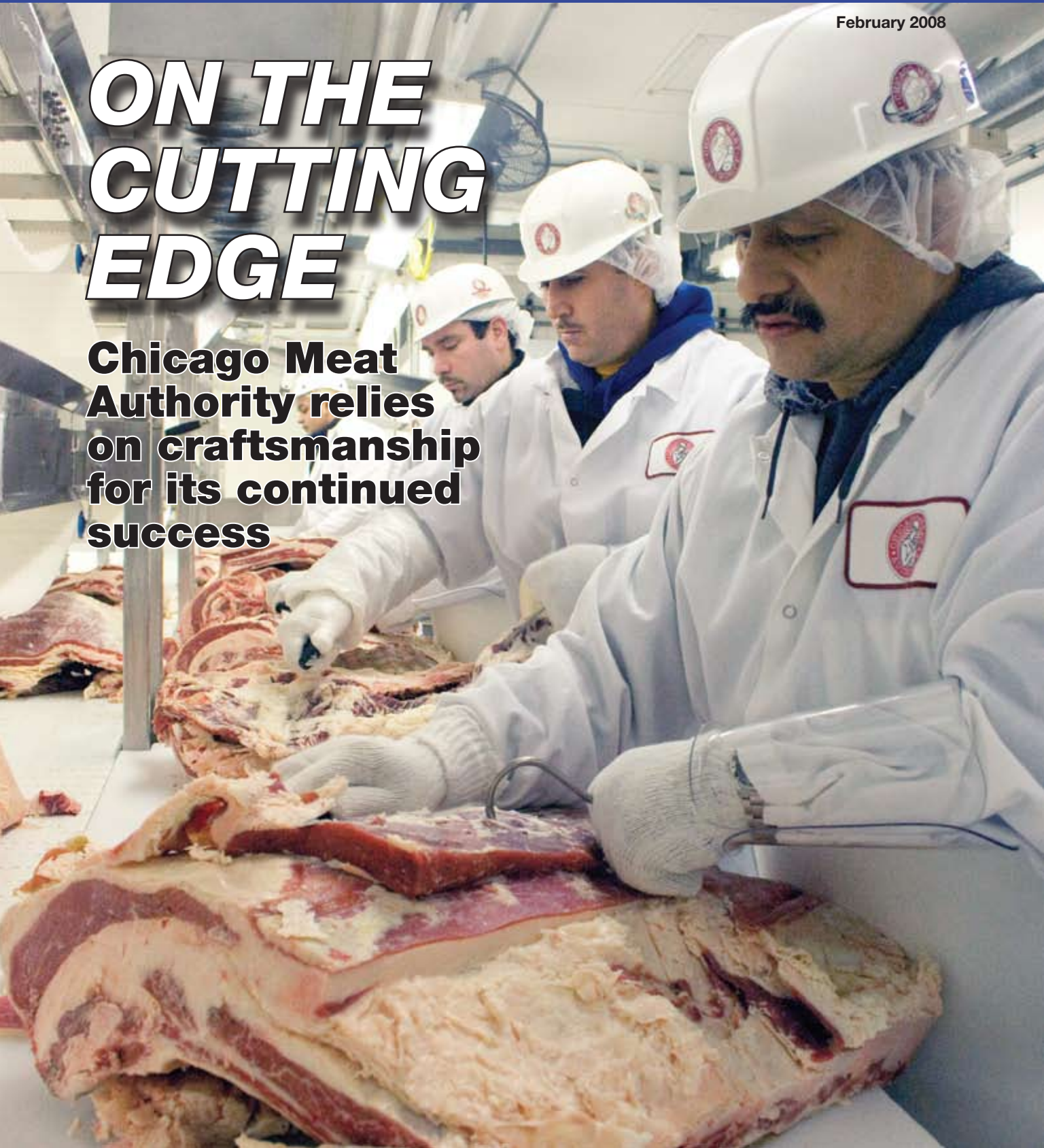
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ON THE CUTTING EDGE

**Chicago Meat
Authority relies
on craftsmanship
for its continued
success**



On the cutting edge

Chicago Meat Authority depends on the expert craftsmanship of its portioners, cutters and trimmers to keep the company moving forward

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Some people are very impressed when they learn that upwards of 400,000 to 500,000 pounds of raw materials enter the 60,000 square-foot Chicago Meat Authority Inc. processing plant each day and that same amount exits the plant later that day in either combo bins or boxes as finished, value-added products. Equally impres-



sive is the fact that the company relies primarily on hand-cutting by expert craftsmen to produce this staggering volume of value-added products instead of automated systems.

“We’re not a heavily automated facility; we don’t rely on a lot on machinery,” admits 14-year veteran Peter Bozzo, vice president, portion control division. “Our portioning, boning and trimming is hand-cut by craftsmen.”

Located in Chicago’s historic Stockyards, CMA processes more than 700 beef, pork and veal products for both foodservice and further processors. Cutting everything from steaks and chops

Plant manager Dennis Myrda (right) and Alicia Lopez, first-shift production supervisor (to his left), oversee trimming and portioning of beef skirt steaks destined for national Mexican restaurants.



Photo courtesy of Chicago Meat Authority

“Our product is really our people,”
– Peter Bozzo, CMA’s vice president, portion control division

to a full line of portion-controlled meats, CMA offers a broad line of stock and custom products primarily under three brands: Chef's Cut (high-end cuts for white table cloth restaurants and other foodservice clients), is the CMA brand, which makes up about 80 percent of the company's finished products, and its Blue Plate brand, products that are sold primarily on price.

Value-added raw materials are also crafted for many further processors. CMA offers several variations of 50-percent lean beef trimmings. One code offers only bigger navel pieces, which are easier to pitchfork and exhibit lower bacterial counts. "Products like this separate us from most commodity-based manufacturers," Bozzo says.

Now in its 18th year of business, the company achieves more than \$75 million in annual sales from products made to customer specs in a plant that has undergone several major expansion and modernization projects.

Hand-crafted expertise

Since day one, company founder and president Jordan Dorfman has placed a premium on hiring and retaining talented, motivated people for all positions. CMA employs about 300 people, with 275 of them working in the plant during three shifts, five to six days a week.

"Our product is really our people, such as our talented portioners, cutters and trimmers," Bozzo says. "We're a high-touch, not high-tech, organization."

Bozzo explains how years ago he helped design a piece of equipment that automatically cut pork chops. "We brought the machine in, but it couldn't deliver high-quality pork chops like our custom craftsmen produce," he says. "Our craftsmen make decisions on every pork chop. They decide whether each piece should be a 4 ounce, 5 ounce or 6 ounce pork chop, porterhouse or regular center cut chop. A machine can't do that."

Experienced craftsman can be found in the plant's portioning operation and on its trim line or on one of its multiple



One cutter, Javier Mata, who has been with the company for 18 years, cuts hundreds of boxes of pork chops a day. This translates into more than 10 million pork chops over his career.

boning lines that handles picnics, hams and butts for further processing. But CMA's craftsmen aren't limited to cutters. Its eight-engineer maintenance staff, for example, collectively has 125 years-plus experience and they often modify plant equipment to help meet custom-product needs. And some equipment, including those used to flatten pork cutlets and beef cube steaks, are custom made by suppliers to CMA specs.

Nothing, in fact, is ordinary about CMA. Custom ingredients are used to meet unique customer specs. And the company uses 30 different types of boxes, which are all designed around products.

CMA's 4-million pound custom-designed blast freezer, kept between -5°F and -15°F, freezes products before cutting plus stores finished products. Most portioned products leave the plant frozen while most grinds and further processed products are refrigerated.

Providing impeccable service is just as important as providing quality product. The company offers custom

Javier Mata (front), who has cut more than 10 million pork chops while at CMA, expertly rounds a CMA Center Cut Pork Chop for the finest in presentation. *Photo courtesy of Chicago Meat Authority*

cutting and trimming, marinating, aging and precooking and a variety of packaging formats.

Another evolving service is the company Web site (www.chicagomeat.com). CMA is upgrading this site for a March launch, which focuses in large part on CMA's products and craftsmanship. "Our Web site will identify many of the points in craftsmanship that you may not notice when viewing a product," says Daniel Mulka, marketing coordinator. "For example, we individually sleeve our back ribs and St. Louis ribs. We offer a guaranteed number of bones per slab and a guaranteed number of full slabs per box. When you open a box of CMA ribs, you're not going to see a little, shrivelly piece of meat thrown in to ensure we hit 30 pounds. You're getting full, thick and meaty slabs; you know how many dinners you're getting. This is one reason why customers keep coming back to CMA."

Providing an atmosphere that enables motivated employees to rise up through the ranks is a custom that has long been nurtured by Dorfman. For example, Alicia Lopez, first-shift production supervisor, has been with the company for 14 years. Working her way through the ranks, Lopez now supervises 35 people.

"My challenge is to make sure we have the right products finished and on time, which keeps our customers happy," she says.

Emphasizing the talent of her employees, she explains how one cutter, Javier Mata, who has been with the company for 18 years, cuts hundreds of boxes of pork chops a day. This translates into more than 10 million pork chops over his career.

Lopez wants to give employees under her supervision the same opportunity she had to rise through the ranks. "If employees are happy, they will work hard for the company to produce the right products. This, in turn, will make our customers happy and allow the company to grow through increased sales," she adds.

Exceeding customer expectations

Ensuring that all finished products are consistently of the highest quality is key to continuing success. CMA's quality control manager Charles Clayton manages nine QC people and brings a unique perspective to the company as he was once a meat inspector for the Illinois Department of Agriculture.

"Our goal is to always exceed customer expectations," Clayton says. "I'm responsible for ensuring products meet our specifications, from raw material coming in the door to finished products going out the door."

Clayton is also responsible for training employees in Good Manufacturing Practices and on the rules that govern manufacturing products, and he is the main liaison between the plant and USDA, among other things.

Avoiding complacency is his major challenge. "You must maintain fresh eyes all of the time so you can recognize if something is not the way it should be," he says. "When you become complacent, that's when the wheels begin to fall off."

CMA's management and employees understand meat, he boasts. "We are recognized in some quarters as being a pioneer in identifying muscles for certain new cuts," he adds. "And we use our knowledge to create new value-added products, such as our new pork flat-iron steak."

Keeping it all together

A typical day for plant manager Dennis Myrda begins at 4:30 a.m. and his responsibilities range from the allotment of production tonnage per day per shift to dealing with manpower issues to maintaining and enhancing worker safety.

"I have a very good staff," he says. "There are six supervisors and one manager who report to me."

One of Myrda's goals is to operate the safest plant possible. "I don't want any of our employees to get hurt," he says. "We talk about safety a lot, and we feel very strongly that we have a safe environment for everyone in the plant."



Chicago Meat Authority steak cutters cut USDA Choice sirloin steaks as Charles Clayton, (back right), CMA quality control manager, and Norma Navarro, QC technician, ensure they meet specifications. Photo courtesy of Chicago Meat Authority

Any employee using a knife in boning, portion control or trimming has the toughest job in the plant, Myrda adds. "There is not a wide margin for error when cutting meat," he says.

A number of CMA workers have been with the company for many years. Myrda cites CMA's Burgundy Club and Platinum Ring – employees who have been with the company five years or 10 years or more, respectively. "Just on my butchering staff alone, 20 percent of them have been here more than 10 years," he says.

Ray Kozlowski, vice president of business development, is responsible for maintaining and expanding existing accounts within the meat group and sourcing additional customers for fabricating. "I'm selling mostly to further processors and grinders" he says. Raw material suppliers continue to consolidate and vertically integrate, which is a major challenge for Kozlowski.

Providing an expanded range of service is becoming increasingly important for CMA customers, he says. "Being flexible, being able to change and adjust orders quickly or being able to get meat on a last-minute notice, all goes into servicing the account, which will result in CMA being the preferred supplier to its customers," he says.

Future plans

CMA's growth plans for 2008 center around building its regional and nation-

al foodservice chain account business. And the knowledge and craftsmanship of CMA's employees continue to be the basis for the company continuing to move forward.

"In order to grow, you have to spend less energy on doing the day-to-day so you can spend more time on creating new strategies," Bozzo says.

Although CMA sells to the international market, it remains focused on growing its own branded business domestically. "We sell some grinding meats, pork picnics and beef trim internationally, but more on an as-needed basis," Bozzo says.

The company will continue seeking opportunities for new, value-added products like its pork flat-iron steak. "I think the most logical opportunities lie in the value-added area – opportunities to cook or season products ourselves," he says.

Bozzo again credits the craftsmanship of the plant's employees as being the driver for the company's continued success. "We cut a lot of product by hand and wouldn't do it any other way," he adds. "The people who run the saws and use the knives are critical parts of the business, as well as those managers on the floor who review what we do on an hourly and daily basis." **M&P**

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