

Know your sausages

How to pick the best of British pork bangers

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From pork and leek to chilli-spiced, there are sausages to suit every taste. Photograph: photolibary.com

We are a nation obsessed with sausages. Last year, according to market research company Kantar Worldpanel, we consumed around 132m kg and spent nearly £500m on them. Sales have risen by more than 13% in the last two years, with some supermarkets recording increases of 30%.

Our ultimate favourites are pork, but how many of us know what is going into them? Unsurprisingly, the cheapest, most processed ones can include some or all of the following: low meat content, added water, sugar, additives and mechanically recovered meat (MRM) – where everything is blasted from the pig carcass to form an unpleasant red sludge. The lower the quality of sausage, the more additives there are, including flavourings such as monosodium glutamate (E621), nitrates to keep the sausage pink and aid preservation, and antioxidants to prevent discolouration. All these are currently deemed safe, but why eat them when delicious and far healthier options are available?

The key is to read the label, regardless of whether or not you are buying a trusted brand. The longer the list, the less desirable the sausage. If you buy them loose from the butcher, be aware that many use ready-made "seasoning" sachets, which along with herbs and spices can contain all sorts of E numbers. Ask about the ingredients and check out sausagelinks.co.uk, which has a guide to all sausage-related E numbers.

There is also the question of how and where the meat is reared. If a sausage is stuffed in the UK, it is technically a British sausage even if the pork has come from elsewhere, so ensure the pork itself is British bred. Aside from the benefits to farmers, if you buy British-bred pork, you know the animal was raised with sound welfare standards. The Soil Association and Freedom Food logos are good indications of quality.

Waitrose now uses its own specially bred, outdoor pigs for all its pork products, even the cheaper Essentials range. It also sells rare-breed sausages over the counter, such as fat Gloucester sausages (£3.15 for 450g) made from pedigree Gloucester Old Spots and stuffed into natural casing. Cheaper sausages often have a casing of artificial collagen that is made by chemically processing beef or pork hide.

A traditional British pork sausage should be succulent and tender with a fresh flavour and a good balance of seasoning. Martin Heap, the man behind Sainsbury's Taste the Difference sausages, says the supermarket is unusual: "We mince a careful balance of fat and lean prime pork cuts [shoulder and belly] through a 5mm mincing die before briefly mixing with natural seasoning in small batches." This more traditional method of mincing meat gives a superb, succulent texture. Most sausages today are made by placing the meat in a vast industrial bowl and chopping it, rather like a giant food processor. The larger the batch, the more paste-like the texture.

Although a high meat content is desirable, it makes it harder to keep the sausages moist and tender. Sainsbury's Taste the Difference Ultimate Chipolatas, made from outdoor-reared pork (£2.259 for 400g), contain 95% meat, while Marks & Spencer's Pork Chipolatas (£2.69 for 340g) are 97% British pork. To create a balanced texture and to keep them juicy, M&S has adapted the normal bowl-chopping method by mixing the contents with a small amount of pork that has been blitzed into a fine paste.

Both M&S and Sainsbury's have opted for these highly flavoured, meaty sausages, but many people prefer softer bangers. Simon Wood, general manager of the organic Well Hung Meat Company, says: "When we started, we tried to convert people to eating firmer sausages with 95% to 98% meat that were just seasoned with salt and pepper, but it soon became clear that a lot of people preferred them with a softer texture and a bit more flavour. So we reduced our meat content and added other flavours." Its apple and pork sausage (70% meat) has become a best-seller.

There are now sausages for every taste from pork and leek to chilli-spiced. So as you light up your barbecue and make the most of the remaining summer weather, choose your bangers carefully.