

Dani-Leigh Bailey

QUALITY SCOUT REPORT

Visit to a McDonald's beef supplier

What makes up a burger patty?

My partner John and I visited Esca, which is where McDonald's beef patties are manufactured. My children were not allowed in the factory due to health and safety regulations.

It's strange to think that Milton Keynes is mostly famous for the concrete cows, so we were hoping to prove that McDonald's patties were made from something other than 100 percent beef.

My first thoughts were that the site didn't look very big, but it did look odd as steam seemed to be coming out of the building. This was from the liquid nitrogen store, which is dry ice - the stuff that can snap fingers off!

We were taken into the building and on the notice board they had a welcome sign with my name on, which I thought was a nice touch. We then had to sign in and put on name badges for security reasons.

We met the staff, including Peter, who heads up Esca; Cliff, who is in charge of the quality of the beef; and Simone (who I later found out is Peter's wife).

Peter then gave us a talk and slide show on what goes on within the factory, where the beef comes from and what percentage of the beef comes from within the British Isles. I was most surprised to learn that 7,000 head of cattle and 13,500 pigs were needed

per week, for McDonald's restaurants in the UK. Peter explained which parts of the cattle were used for the burgers, as well as all the legislation that was required in meat production. You will be surprised to know that the complaints ratio for 2005 was 1:176,000,000.

Peter and his team were quick to answer any questions that we had and didn't evade any of them. In fact, they even gave away some trade secrets of the ratios involved in making the patties!

I also learnt that there is an Esca plant in Scunthorpe; Esca being the sole manufacturers of McDonald's patties.

The strict hygiene requirements

It was time to conduct a tour of the factory, and we were required to remove all jewellery (which we were hoping to catch them out on) and put on special trousers, shoe covers, hair nets (poor Jason, the camera man, even had to put a net over his beard) and hard helmets with ear defenders for the noise in the factory. On the factory floor we put on white coats, washed our hands and sanitised them, and had to push our way through the turnstile with our hips. I then had to cross this funny looking bridge with brushes that scrubbed your feet. All this, before we could even get to the factory floor.

Freshly minced and frozen

We were taken firstly to the loading bay where the raw meat comes in. Cliff explained that the meat is checked for a date and batch number. He also checks the quality of the meat and makes sure that they have been given the right cuts. If he isn't sure, or doesn't like anything about the meat, it gets returned to the abattoir.

The meat is then taken into the chiller to be stored until needed. The beef is no more than five days old from slaughter to usage. It is taken from there to the big mincers, where it is minced and then mixed with the frozen beef in the blenders. Then it goes into the patty-forming machine, and when they come out of that, any defects are detected and removed. Next, the burger patties are sprayed with a fine water mist (to stop them from drying out and to help with the freezing process) before being flash frozen and packed into boxes. These boxes are put onto conveyer belts, sealed, loaded on to pallets and put into storage freezers ready for distribution to McDonald's restaurants.

Checks, checks and more checks

We also visited the tower where random checks are done on each batch of patties made. Next we went to the lab where again a random selection of frozen patties are taken off the production line and cooked as they would be in a McDonald's restaurant. When they are cooked, they have a probe inserted into them to check the cooked temperature. We were asked if we would like to taste them. On the day we visited, they were making the Big Tasty patties and the Breakfast sausage patty. I must be honest here; I don't like the Big Tasty so I was a bit reluctant to taste it. But Peter explained that all the burger patties are the same, just different weights, and it's the sauce and garnish that makes them taste different. The burger patty was absolutely gorgeous, and really succulent. And the sausage patty was to die for. We tasted the Big Tasty patty as it was and also with the special mix of spices that they add at the restaurant.

As an ex-cleaner of a children's ward (plus my partner is currently employed as a quality assurance manager), we were on the look out for cleanliness and other issues that we know about.

But can report that this company clearly adheres to them all.

The staff were well looked after

After the visit was concluded, we went back over the shoe wash and removed our white coats, putting them straight in the laundry bins.

On the way back to Peter's office, he took us to the staff restaurant where I learnt that all tea and coffee is free; as is a hot meal. The staff are even given free patties to take home each fortnight, and as they are 100 percent beef they can be used for other recipes. We also went past the security guards office and were introduced to everyone we met. They didn't try to hide anything - we were shown everything and anything we wanted to see.

I did manage to speak to some of the staff and enquire what it was like to work for Esca, and everyone said the same thing; that it was a good company. Most had been there longer than five years and went out together at least one a month, and that included upper management.

Six urban myths we have busted

The urban myths we were asked to investigate were:

Do McDonald's burgers contain all cuts of meat?

No, only forequarter and flank are used to make McDonald's burgers.

Are strange chemicals added to the meat?

No, the only thing that is added is a fine mist spray of water to help with the flash freezing process.

Does the meat come from Brazil?

No, only beef from one of the 14 specially selected abattoirs from around the British Isles supply meat for McDonald's.

Does the flash freezing process compromise meat quality?

No, it helps keep the meat fresher as it freezes quickly. That is why the fine spray of water is added just before freezing.

How is a high level of cleanliness and hygiene ensured in the plant?

They have specialised contract cleaners who come in every night after the shift has finished and clean everything in sight. If a machine breaks down, it is fixed straight away - either by an onsite engineer or a specialist is called in. The meat is never left lying around; it will either go back into the chiller or if it has gone above a certain temperature it is thrown away.

The plant also processes the Breakfast patty, which is pork. The beef and pork are kept completely separate - if you work on the pork line you cannot work on the beef line that day and visa versa.

I can confirm that it is only 100 percent beef that goes into your McDonald's Burger.