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Taste of Philly only strikes home 'wit' some consumers

CHEESY

Photos by Getty

PRODUCT

Tony Luke's Beef Ribeye Sliced Steaks

PRICE

\$10.99/4 (4-oz.) servings/1 lb

PLUS

Convenience and taste

PROBLEM

Added ingredients and price

There are few sandwiches more iconic than the Philly cheesesteak, authentically made with thinly sliced, well-marbled ribeye steak, topped with melted provolone, white American cheese — or “wit” Cheez Whiz — and often fried onions and/or grilled green peppers, on what Philadelphians call a “hoagie” roll. Those of us who don’t have access to a local butcher for fresh cut ribeye with a slicer —

or who don’t live down the street from Philly landmarks like Pat’s or Geno’s — tend to go to the freezer case to purchase the next-best thing. We recently discovered Tony Luke’s Beef Ribeye Sliced Steaks, touting “Authentic Philly Steak” and “The Real Taste of South Philly,” and knew we had to hear thoughts on this regional favorite.

DEMOGRAPHICS

A diverse group of tasters, many of whom have indulged in “real”

Philly cheesesteaks in Philadelphia, prepared Tony Luke’s version at home.

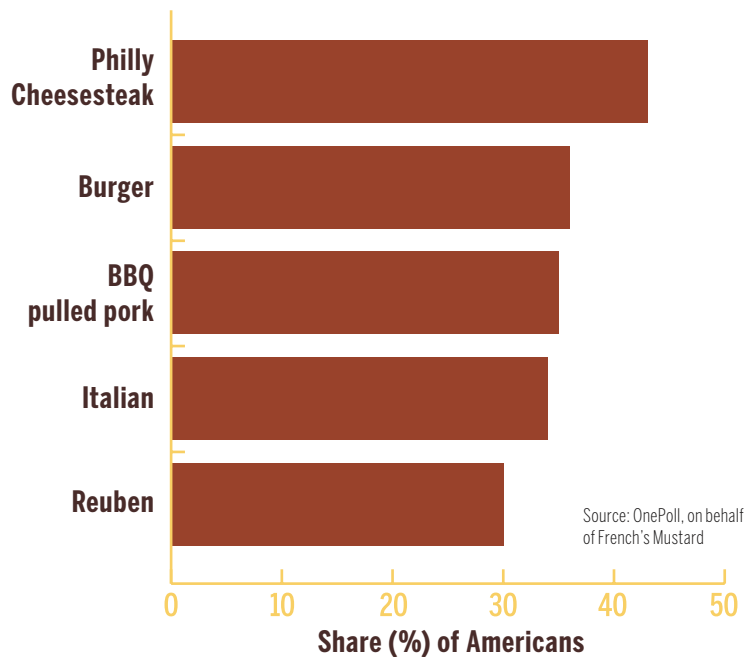
FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND APPEARANCE

A couple of tasters had positive reactions at the outset to the picture of the cheesesteak on the package. “The sandwich looks delicious on the box,” one said. And another wrote, “I’d probably buy just from the looks of it (the package) and knowing that for \$10.99 it serves four.”

A number of commenters opined about the ingredient list. “I was excited to see ‘beef ribeye’ on the package front, but then it says, ‘a beef, water, and binder product, chunked & formed’ and my excitement was shattered,” one commenter wrote. Another started out thinking it was frozen ribeye steaks, but then noticed the rest: “Beef, water, soy protein concentrate, dextrose, modified food starch, sodium

Brotherly LOVE

A 2021 survey commissioned by French's Mustard found the Philly cheesesteak to be Americans' favorite sandwich. With 43% of surveyed Americans favoring the sandwich, it beat out such mainstays as burgers, pulled pork, and the mighty reuben.



phosphate, salt & hydrolyzed soy protein.”

A couple others weren't sure what to make of the ribeye qualifier: “Interesting that they call out beef ribeye ... but then never explain why that's important,” said one. The other wrote, “I don't know if ribeye is fancy. Is that why it's so expensive?”

A few tasters shared comments about the preparation instructions on the package. “Thought there was no way this can be ready in 3 minutes ... but it was pretty much 3 minutes!” one wrote. Another said, “I had the forethought to thaw it in the fridge like the box gave the option to.

I thought this would be the best approach because cooking meat from frozen can get a little weird.” And a third wanted to know more: “How do I make a Philly steak sandwich? Tell me on the box; we don't cook with a computer or cellphone nearby.”

A couple of commenters wished that the package had been constructed for easier resealing. “The picture of the cheesesteak on the front of the package is very appealing, but I wish the inside package was resealable,” one wrote. And another said, “Shrink wrap is terrible since we didn't use all four; should be resealable.

Paper between each steak made separation easy.”

Finally, one taster was immediately pleased with the look of the product. “Opening the package, the product was what I expected — the thin slabs, frozen together,” they wrote. “But to my pleasant surprise, it seemed ‘meatier’ than I was expecting. I would have expected way more fat, where this was more meat, which was nice.”

TASTE, TEXTURE AND MORE

Once they opened the package and commenced to cooking, a few tasters found the directions confus-

ing. “The cooking directions say: Pre-heat skillet to 375°F (high),” one shared. “Unless you're using an electric skillet, how would you know what temperature your skillet was at?” Another was even more flummoxed: “The strange part is the instructions say to preheat your skillet to 375°. Now I don't cook much, but I don't know how to preheat a skillet. In the oven? Just say put your skillet on high. It's a little misleading.”

Several found the taste and texture very pleasing. “From one box we made two large sandwiches and one smaller sandwich,” said one

commenter. “We added Cheez Whiz on top — going with the whole Philly theme. At the Phillies games they would ask ‘wit or wit out’ (onions) so we'd order ‘Whiz wit.’ These reminded me of those steak sandwiches. The meat was full of flavor, very juicy and no gristle.”

Others noted they had added ingredients like cheese and onions. “I sautéed onions, cooked the steak without breaking it up, topped it with white American cheese and ate it on an Italian roll which made for a very juicy, satisfying sandwich,” one wrote. A second taster said, “My husband pan-fried

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TASTE *test*

“The meat by itself is very watery and chewy, almost has a fake meat flavor.”

the steak, sautéing onions to go with the sandwiches. He added a little shredded mozzarella and put it under the broiler to toast and melt the cheese. I was pleasantly surprised at the meat. It wasn't too fatty or chewy — it was real meat.”

But several commenters were less impressed, saying that the ingredients they added themselves were what made the Tony Luke's product viable. “It's clearly a comfort food,” one said. “I can appreciate the comfort side of it — meat, cheese, onions, bread. But cut up and formed makes it more like Spam. It's fake.” A second taster wrote, “The meat by itself is very watery and chewy — almost has a fake meat flavor. But once dressed up with cheese, some pepper, grilled onions on a toasted bun, I could eat more. It just needs a little more love.”

Finally, one reviewer said their family was lukewarm — but gave some context for that. “My family said they were just OK. They said the texture was weird and there was a slight chemical taste. We usually buy frozen sliced beef for cheesesteaks at Whole Foods, so I think my family is a bit spoiled!”

UPSHOT

In the end, a slight majority of tasters said they would buy the Tony Luke's product again. “While these are more expensive than the Steak-umm brand, it is well worth it for real, juicy steaks that weren't super greasy,” one said. “I would purchase these for \$10.99. Everyone in my family really enjoyed these, and it was a delicious, quick and easy dinner.” A second wrote, “It was an all-around win for me! I think these will be the sliced steaks I buy over Steak-umms.” And a third opined: “So quick. Does the job, especially when it's dressed up.”

But others landed somewhere between “maybe” and “no.” One taster wrote, “I might buy to keep on-hand for a single-serving cheesesteak vs. buying the Pat LaFreida, which I prefer but haven't found the best way to freeze leftovers.” Another said, “I'm a firm ‘maybe’ as to whether I would buy it again. If I really wanted a cheesesteak or French dip-type sandwich, I would just pay slightly more to have it made for me.” And a third shared, “It's very easy and convenient, but I would not buy ... way overpriced. We'll



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TASTE test

“So quick. Does the job, especially when it’s dressed up.”

go with ‘real’ steak anytime, not even a question. This is a frozen steak with unknown quantities of water and soy protein.”

CONCLUSION

Tony Luke’s Beef Ribeye Sliced Steaks met most of our tasters’ desire for a quick, convenient last-minute dinner, snack, or lunch — one that is ready in a matter of minutes. Yet, some were disappointed that the ribeye steaks, which are the steak of choice for authentic Philly cheesesteak sandwiches, were actually formed steaks made with binders such as soy protein concentrate. Steak-umms, which is clearly Tony Luke’s main frozen competitor — at least for our participants — are made from 100% beef that’s been

chopped, shaped, and thinly sliced, and is generally less expensive.

We believe the purchase decision for Tony Luke’s will come down to tradeoffs consumers will make, probably at the point of purchase. What’s the driver for them, at that time? Authenticity from a Philly icon? The compelling imagery? If it’s price and value — especially in the face of inflation — will “authentic” beat lower price? Quality? Convenience? Their driver will dictate their spending decision and which package they ultimately select.

We liked the finished product, and some of us appreciate the ease of the four portions, but some just couldn’t get past the ingredient statement.

by Jacqueline Beckley, The Understanding & Insight Group, and Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration LLC

Food product development and consumer research veterans, Jacqueline Beckley, Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, join Meatingplace Magazine as regular contributors to MeatingTaste, a consumer sampling of new products featured in our monthly Taste Test column. Here’s how the program works: The meat item is distributed to consumers, including the core demographic, for preparation in their own houses. No instructions are provided to the consumer, other than to write their overall impressions of the product, as well as to evaluate the flavor, texture, packaging and ease of use. Beckley, Cesario and Vahalik look for common threads by using Getting It!®, a system developed to listen to consumers about products. The sample of people is not intended to be a ‘taste test’ in a controlled setting, nor is it intended to simulate a focus group. Others are doing both. Rather, the intent is to interpret the response of the people who might purchase a product like this and use it, simply based on their encounters with the product in their individual, unique home environment. That is how U&I has been developing cutting-edge product and people understanding since 1999.