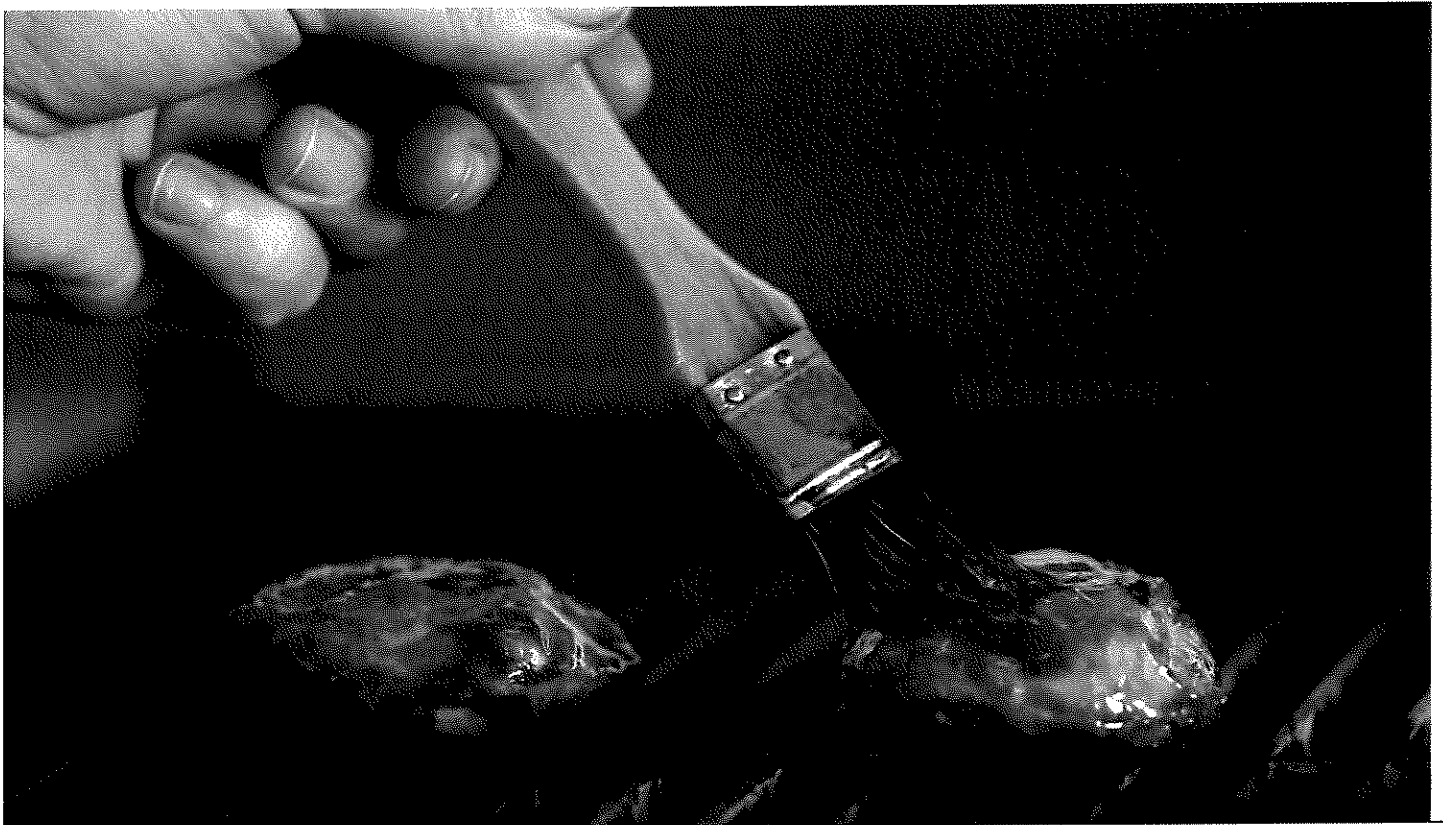


BUSINESS

Lab-grown meat isn't on store shelves yet, but some states have already banned it



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Lab-grown meat is not currently available in any U.S. grocery stores or restaurants. If some lawmakers have their way, it never will be.

Earlier this month, both Florida and Alabama banned the sale of cultivated meat and seafood, which is grown from animal cells. In Iowa, the governor signed a bill prohibiting schools from buying lab-grown meat. Federal lawmakers are also looking to restrict it.

It's unclear how far these efforts will go. Some cultivated meat companies say they're considering legal action, and some states – like Tennessee – shelved proposed bans after lawmakers argued they would restrict consumers' choices.

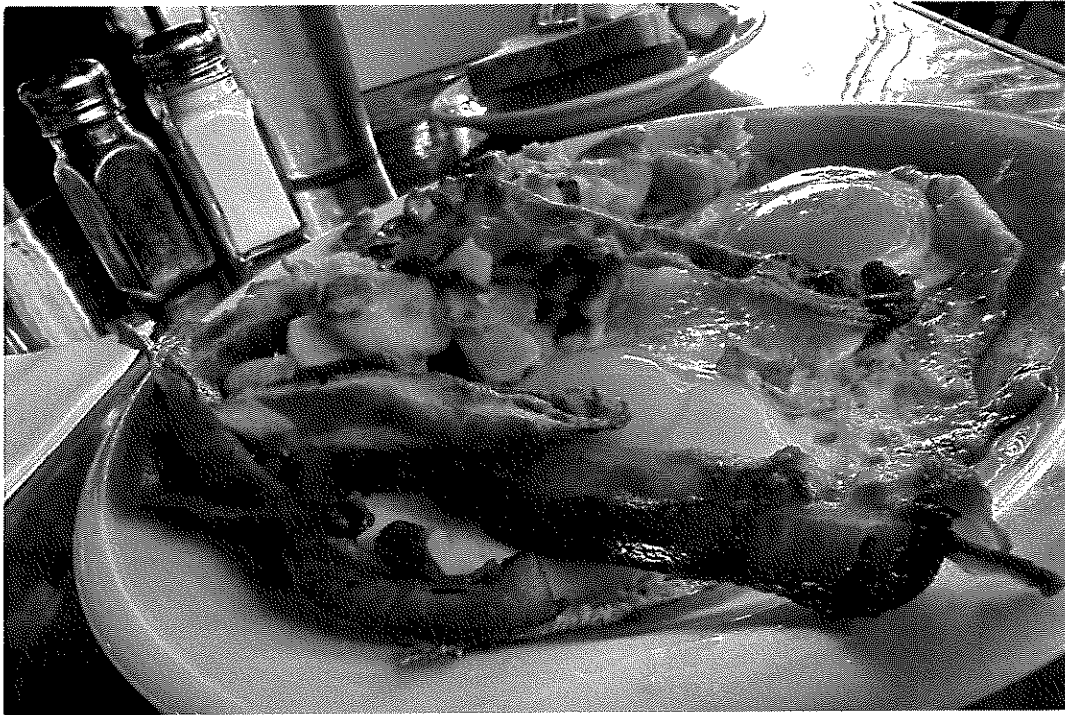
Still, it's a deflating end to a year that started with great optimism for the cultivated meat industry.

The U.S. approved the sale of lab-grown meat for the first time in June 2023, allowing two California startups, Good Meat and Upside Foods, to sell cultivated chicken. Two high-end U.S. restaurants briefly added the

products to their menus. Some cultivated meat companies began expanding production. One of Good Meat's products went on sale at a grocery in Singapore.

But before long, politicians were pumping the brakes. Lawmakers in seven states introduced legislation that would ban cultivated meat, according to Kim Tyrrell, an associate director with the National Conference of State Legislatures.

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In the U.S. Senate, Democratic Sen. Jon Tester of Montana and Republican Mike Rounds of South Dakota introduced a bill in January to prohibit the use of lab-grown meat in school lunch programs.

The backlash isn't confined to the U.S. Italy banned the sale of lab-grown meat late last year. French lawmakers have also introduced a bill to ban it.

The pushback is happening even though lab-grown meat and seafood are far from reaching the market in a meaningful way because they're so expensive to make. Cultivated products are grown in steel tanks using cells from a living animal, a fertilized egg or a storage bank. The cells are fed with special blends of water, sugar, fats and vitamins. Once they've grown, they're formed into cutlets, nuggets and other shapes.

Companies have been heavily focused on scaling production to bring down costs and on winning government approval to sell their products. Now, they're also trying to figure out how to respond to the state bans. Upside Foods launched a Change.org petition, inviting supporters to "tell politicians to stop policing your plate."

"It's a shame they are closing the door before we even get out of the gate," Tom Rossmeissl, the head of global marketing for Good Meat, said. The company is considering its legal options, he said.

Backers of the bans say they want to protect farmers and consumers. Cultivated meat has only been around for about a decade, they say, and they're concerned about its safety.

"Alabamians want to know what they are eating, and we have no idea what is in this stuff or how it will affect us," Republican state Sen. Jack Williams, the sponsor of Alabama's bill, wrote in an email to The Associated Press. "Meat comes from livestock raised by hardworking farmers and ranchers, not from a petri dish grown by scientists."

But those within the cultivated meat industry say their products must meet rigorous government safety tests before going on sale. Their nascent industry isn't trying to replace meat, they say, but figure out ways to feed the world's growing need for protein.

Rossmeissl said the U.S. is currently leading the effort to develop cultivated meat and seafood, with 45 companies in the space, but that could change. In January, for example, an Israeli company received preliminary approval to sell the world's first steaks made from cultivated beef. China is also investing heavily in lab-grown meat.

"It should be startling and concerning to Americans that we're throwing up barriers to something that could be really important to our economy and food security," he said.

State Sen. Jay Collins, a Republican who sponsored the Florida bill, noted that the legislation doesn't ban research, just the manufacturing and sale of lab-grown meat. Collins said safety was his primary motivator, but he also wants to protect Florida agriculture.

"Let's not be in a rush to replace something," he said. "It's a billion-dollar industry. We feed a ton of people across the country with our cattle, beef, pork, poultry and fish industries."

Rossmeissl thinks the meat industry is trying to avoid what happened to the dairy industry after the introduction of plant-based alternatives like oat milk. Plant-based milk made up 15% of U.S. milk sales last year; that's up from around 6% a decade ago, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Good Food Institute, an advocacy group for plant-based and cultivated products.

Meat producers did back the bans in Florida and Alabama. The leaders of those states' cattlemen's associations – which are advocacy groups for ranchers – stood next to both governors as they signed the bans into law.

But the picture is more complicated at the national level, where the meat industry doesn't support bans on cultivated products. Some meat producers, like JBS Foods, are working on developing cultivated meat of their own.

"We do not support the route of banning these outright," Sigrid Johannes, the director of government affairs for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, said. "We're not afraid of competing with these products in the marketplace."

The Meat Institute – which represents JBS, Tyson and other big meat companies – sent a letter to Alabama lawmakers warning them that the state's ban was likely unconstitutional since federal law regulates meat processing and interstate commerce.

The founders of Wildtype, a San Francisco-based company that makes cultivated salmon, traveled to Florida and Alabama to testify against the bills but weren't able to sway the outcome. They hope someone will challenge the bans in court but say it's not realistic for their tiny company to take on that battle.

"We are David and on the other side of the aisle there is a gigantic Goliath," Wildtype co-founder Arye Elfenbein said.

Durbin reported from Detroit. Brendan Farrington in Tallahassee, Florida; Kimberly Chandler in Montgomery, Alabama; and Jonathan Mattise in Nashville contributed.