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Clean Meat: The Future of Sustainable Protein

Dr. Shruti Gupta and Dr. Sanchit Pal Singh
Ph.D. Scholar,
ICAR - National Dairy Research Institute,
Karnal 132001, Haryana, India
***Corresponding Author:** shruti.gupta0202@gmail.com
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Abstract:

Clean meat, also known as cultured or cell-based meat, has emerged as a promising innovation to address the increasing global demand for animal protein while reducing the environmental and ethical concerns associated with conventional livestock farming. With the global population expected to exceed 9 billion by 2050, sustainable alternatives for meat production are becoming essential. Clean meat is produced by cultivating animal cells in controlled laboratory conditions using advanced techniques from tissue engineering, biotechnology, and food science. The process involves the use of starter cells, nutrient-rich culture media, scaffolds, and bioreactors to develop muscle tissue without the need for animal slaughter. This review highlights the concept, historical development, production requirements, and major fabrication techniques involved in clean meat production. It also discusses the potential benefits of cultured meat, including environmental sustainability, improved animal welfare, food safety, and enhanced food security. Despite its advantages, challenges such as high production costs, technical limitations, and consumer acceptance remain barriers to large-scale commercialization.

Key words: Cell-based meat, Bioreactors, scaffold-based, self-organising

Introduction: Feeding a Growing Planet:

The global appetite for meat is expanding at an unprecedented pace. Rising incomes, urban lifestyles, and changing dietary preferences have contributed to an ever-increasing demand for animal protein. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the world population is projected to surpass 9 billion by 2050, pushing the consumption of meat and poultry higher than ever before. Conventional livestock farming, responsible for nearly 77% of agricultural land use and a significant share of greenhouse gas emissions, faces growing criticism for its environmental footprint, ethical implications, and resource inefficiency.

This escalating tension between demand and sustainability has inspired scientists to look beyond the farmyard. The idea of growing meat directly from animal cells, first envisioned by visionaries such as Winston Churchill and Frederick Edwin Smith, is now becoming a tangible reality. Known variously as *clean meat*, *cultured meat*, *lab-grown meat*, or *cell-based meat*, this innovation could revolutionize how humanity produces and consumes protein. It promises real meat without slaughter, drastically reducing environmental impact and animal suffering.

While the technology remains in its infancy, clean meat represents perhaps the most exciting transformation in food production since the agricultural revolution.

Clean Meat: Concept and Evolution:

Clean meat is produced by cultivating animal cells in a controlled environment outside the animal's body. Instead of raising and slaughtering livestock, scientists isolate stem cells with the ability to multiply and differentiate into muscle tissue. These cells are then nurtured in bioreactors using nutrient-rich media, allowing them to form fibers, tissues, and ultimately, edible meat (Cheng et al., 2006).

The journey toward this innovation is remarkable:

- **1912:** Alexis Carrel successfully kept a fragment of chick heart tissue alive in a petri dish, marking the first instance of sustained tissue culture.
- **1999:** Dutch researcher Willem van Eelen received the first international patent for cultured meat technologies.
- **2002:** NASA funded experiments to produce fish fillets from goldfish cells for potential space missions.
- **2013:** Dr. Mark Post unveiled the world's first lab-grown burger in London, valued at an astounding $300,000.
- **2016 - 2018:** Startups like Memphis Meats (now Upside Foods) and Mosa Meat achieved significant breakthroughs, making cultured meatballs and poultry. In India, the CSIR-Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB) and ICAR-National Research Centre on Meat began work on *Ahimsa meat*, emphasizing slaughter-free protein for an ethical market.

Today, dozens of global companies-from Israel's Super Meat to Singapore's Eat Just-are racing to refine and commercialize clean meat products.

Basic Requirements for Clean Meat Production:

At its core, clean meat production is a multidisciplinary effort combining biotechnology, tissue engineering, and food science. The process requires five essential components: **cells, culture media, scaffolds, bioreactors, and regulatory conditions**.

- **Source Cells:**

The foundation of clean meat lies in the selection of starter cells, typically satellite cells or myoblasts, from a living animal through a painless biopsy. These cells have self-renewal and differentiation capabilities, enabling them to develop into muscle fibers under suitable conditions. Advances in stem cell biology have also opened possibilities for using induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs), which can proliferate indefinitely.

- **Culture Media and Growth Factors:**

For cells to grow and multiply, they require a nutrient-dense medium rich in amino acids, vitamins, minerals, and lipids. Traditionally, fetal bovine serum (FBS) was used for this purpose, but its cost, ethical concerns, and inconsistency have spurred a push toward serum-free alternatives. Researchers are now formulating plant-based or recombinant media that provide the same growth factors without animal byproducts, improving both sustainability and cost efficiency (Srutee *et al.*, 2022).

- **Scaffolds:**

Muscle cells are anchorage-dependent; they need a surface to latch onto and develop a three-dimensional structure. Scaffolds serve as this framework. Ideal scaffolds are edible, biocompatible, and designed to support tissue growth and alignment. Materials such as collagen, alginate, and chitosan are commonly used. Some research also explores edible scaffolds made from plant fibers and textured soy protein to mimic the bite and texture of natural muscle.

- **Bioreactors:**

Bioreactors function as the "artificial wombs" of cultured meat. They provide a controlled environment, maintaining temperature, pH, oxygenation, and nutrient circulation. Stirred-tank or perfusion bioreactors ensure cells receive enough nutrients and mechanical stimulation to promote growth. While current commercial bioreactors are often limited to laboratory scale (1–2 cubic meters), industrial-scale systems exceeding 10,000 liters are in development.

- **Physical and Electro-mechanical Stimulation:**

To replicate natural muscle movement, cultured tissues often need gentle electrical or mechanical stimulation. Low-frequency pulses or cyclic stretching help cells form mature, aligned fibers resembling real meat. This step also influences the texture and protein composition of the final product.

Major Processes in Clean Meat Production:

Clean meat can be fabricated using two primary techniques: **scaffold-based (cell culture)** and **self-organizing (tissue culture)** methods.

- **Scaffold-Based Production:**

In this approach, cells are seeded onto a scaffold submerged in nutrient media inside a bioreactor. The scaffold provides both support and shape, encouraging cells to fuse into myotubes and form thin sheets of muscle tissue. The product is suitable for ground meat products-burgers, sausages, nuggets-but lacks the marbled texture of traditional cuts. This technique is the basis for most early prototypes, such as Dr. Post's 2013 burger and Memphis Meats' meatballs.

- **Self-Organizing Technique:**

  This approach mimics natural tissue growth by allowing cells to self-assemble into structured tissues. Often involving co-culturing of muscle and fat cells, the method can produce more realistic, steak-like cuts. However, scaling up remains difficult, as oxygen and nutrients struggle to reach the inner layers of thick tissues. Researchers are addressing this by experimenting with edible "capillary" networks or 3D bioprinting to channel nutrients through the cultured mass (Akshay *et al*., 2024).

- **Emerging Technologies**

  Recent studies propose advanced fabrication tools like **bioprinting**, **organ printing**, and **biophotonics** to layer multiple cell types mimicking not just muscle, but also fat and connective tissues. These advancements aim to deliver a product indistinguishable in texture, flavor, and nutrition from conventional meat.

Benefits of Clean Meat:

The promise of clean meat extends beyond convenience-it represents a potential solution to some of the greatest challenges of our era.

- **Environmental Sustainability:**

  Traditional livestock farming is one of the largest contributors to deforestation, methane emissions, and freshwater depletion. Cultured meat, on the other hand, is projected to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 96%, water use by 82–96%, and land use by 99%, according to Tuomisto *et al.* (2011). Such reductions are pivotal in achieving global climate targets and preserving ecosystems.

- **Animal Welfare:**

  Perhaps the most ethically motivating benefit, clean meat production eliminates the need for animal slaughter. Only a minor cell biopsy is required, sparing sentient creatures from pain and confinement. This "slaughter-free" model resonates strongly with ethical consumers and religious groups seeking cruelty-free alternatives.

- **Public Health and Safety:**

  Because cultured meat is produced under sterile laboratory conditions, it is free from many pathogens and contaminants associated with slaughterhouses. There is little risk of zoonotic disease transmission, and the production process avoids excessive antibiotic usage, addressing global concerns over antimicrobial resistance.

- **Food Security and Customization:**

  Clean meat offers the potential to produce protein anywhere, including urban centers or regions unsuitable for livestock farming. Production can be scaled to meet demand locally, reducing dependence on long supply chains. Moreover, the nutrient profile of cultured meat can be customized,

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such as adjusting fat content or enriching omega-3 fatty acids, to create healthier meat products.

- **Religious and Cultural Acceptance:**

  Since no actual animal slaughter is involved, clean meat circumvents religious taboos associated with conventional methods (e.g., halal or kosher slaughter). Its ethical nature may also appeal to vegetarians and flexitarians seeking sustainable protein without ethical compromise.

Challenges and Limitations:

Despite the promise, several technical, social, and economic hurdles remain before clean meat becomes mainstream.

- **High Cost of Production:**

  The first cultured burger cost over $300,000 to produce; though costs have since fallen to under $20 per burger, large-scale commercialization still demands affordable media, efficient bioreactors, and renewable energy integration. Serum-free media remain particularly expensive.

- **Structural and Sensory Gaps:**

  Recreating the texture, juiciness, and marbling of traditional meat is a scientific challenge. Natural meat derives complexity from muscle fiber alignment, connective tissues, and fat distribution-features difficult to engineer in vitro. Scientists are exploring combinations of muscle, fat, and vascular cell types to mimic these properties (Bhat *et al*., 2019).

- **Color and Flavor Modulation:**

  The characteristic red color of meat comes from myoglobin and hemoglobin-compounds not naturally produced in abundance in cultured systems. Researchers are developing microbial fermentation techniques using *E. coli* or *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* to synthesize these pigments. Similarly, generating authentic cooked-meat flavor remains an active field in food chemistry.

- **Consumer Acceptance:**

  Public perception poses perhaps the greatest barrier. Many consumers express skepticism or unease toward “lab-grown” products, citing unnaturalness or safety concerns. Studies indicate acceptance varies by education, cultural background, and exposure to information.

  - In a U.S. survey, about 65% of respondents were willing to try cultured meat, but only 33% would eat it regularly (Wilks *et al.*, 2017).
  - Research in India and China showed higher openness, nearly 50–60% expressing interest (Bryant et al., 2019).

  As public awareness grows and prices fall, acceptance is expected to improve, much like earlier innovations such as pasteurization or genetically modified crops.

- **Livelihood Impact:**

  Clean meat could disrupt traditional livestock economies. Millions depend on animal farming for

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income, particularly in rural regions. Policymakers must anticipate these transitions by supporting training, technology access, and alternative livelihoods for affected communities.

Current Global and Indian Scenario:

Singapore became the first country to approve the commercial sale of lab-grown meat in 2020 through Eat Just's chicken bites. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) followed with regulatory approvals in 2022 for cultivated chicken by Upside Foods and Good Meat. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is currently reviewing similar proposals.

In India, research led by the **CSIR-CCMB** and **ICAR-NRCM** focuses on developing "Ahimsa meat," aligned with India's ethical and vegetarian principles. Startups like *Evo Foods* are also exploring cell-based and plant-protein hybrids. Given India's rapidly growing population and mixed dietary landscape, the country holds both a major market opportunity and a moral imperative to adopt sustainable protein technologies.

Consumer Outlook: Are We Ready to Switch Plates?

Consumer acceptance will ultimately determine whether clean meat remains a niche luxury or becomes a staple food. This depends on five interconnected factors:

- **Trust and Transparency** – People need clear, honest information about the process, how cells are collected, grown, and tested.
- **Affordability** – Prices must be competitive with traditional meat to attract mainstream consumers.
- **Taste and Texture** – Sensory satisfaction is paramount; people rarely compromise on flavor.
- **Ethical Appeal** – Marketing emphasizing animal welfare, sustainability, and reduced climate impact resonates strongly with younger demographics.
- **Regulatory Confidence** – Government approvals and safety standards will reassure buyers and formalize market entry.

Public education campaigns, culinary collaborations, and celebrity endorsements may accelerate normalization, just as they did for early plant-based products.

Conclusion: A Boon for Humanity

Clean meat production stands at the crossroads of ethics, science, and sustainability. It offers an elegant solution to multiple crises: climate change, animal welfare, and food security, by decoupling meat from livestock. Although technological and economic barriers persist, rapid advancements in stem cell culture, bioreactor design, and food biotechnology are steadily bridging the gap between concept and commercialization.

As the industry evolves, attention must also turn to legal frameworks, nutritional evaluation, and equitable access to this innovation. In the near future, cultured meat could coexist alongside traditional and plant-based proteins, offering consumers choice without compromise.

In essence, clean meat is not just a scientific curiosity- it is a glimpse into a more compassionate, sustainable future of food.

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