

Branded beef products satisfy consumer desire to know where their food is produced

BY JOLENE STEVENS

Today's livestock production, Allen Williams emphasizes, isn't only a matter of knowing how to select the bulls and heifers needed to produce a quality beef product.

Williams, a livestock consultant for the Jacob Alliance LLC, Starkville, Miss., says it's a business that's become a great deal more complicated.

"The successful producer of today," he says, "needs an awareness of distribution and processing as well as the branding and marketing of his livestock products."

"Producers are used to doing what they do best, producing the live animal. Once you get beyond the farm or ranch gate, things get more complicated," he says.

That was the message Williams had for participants at a Practical Farmers of Iowa field day hosted by Tom and Kristi German in August.

The Germans, who farm near Holstein, describe themselves as farmers "dedicated to artisan, family-scale" farming. What originally began as a beef and poultry operation in 1936, and was to become a pasture-based system in 1993, is now, as of 1999, "transitioned" to an organic operation. Their farm is one of the first Iowa farms to be certified by the Food Alliance's Midwestern branch in White Bear, Minn.

"Thankful Harvest Tenderheart Beef" produced by the Germans is marketed through a bimonthly or annual subscription program for consumers, with selected frozen cuts available for sale at the farm or the Taste of Country store near Holstein.

And while the beef segment of the operation is the major focus of their marketing efforts, the Germans also sell eggs and poultry products.

Williams sees branded products and point-of-origin labeling as "critically important" elements to today's successful beef producers. The Jacob Alliance has, he says, spent "over a million dollars" in market research studies and consumer focus group research on such issues.

"The studies have shown us that the consumer absolutely wants a product that is source-verified to farm or ranch origin," Williams says. "This also means a product verified to country-of-origin labeling, as well. Consumers are telling us they want U.S.-produced beef."

New way of marketing

Williams says producer-interest in this type of marketing is "catching on faster" with producers than expected. "Quite honestly," he says, "10 years ago, you would not have had anywhere near the interest among producers throughout the United States for this type of production."

"What fascinates me," Williams continues, "is that in the last five years, there's been a literal explosion of this thinking, and it's been literally in every state of the United States. We are seeing a tremendous number of producers that I think are just tired of delay in orienting production. Today, they're seeing some true benefits in shifting and going back to this type of production."

The bottom line for producers, Williams suggests, is to produce a product the consumer wants.

"It's just like GM or Ford," he says. "If a vehicle doesn't go over well with a consumer, they're not going to try to produce it and push it down the consumer's throat. We've been kind of famous for this in agriculture."

It's essential, Williams told field day participants, that producers raise meat products for the type of consumer they want to target and that the product is consistent and uniform in quality. "We can't have varia-

tions in this product that is going to throw the consumer off. We also have to consider possible future changes and, at the same time, use caution that we don't step out of the box, so to speak, and create a new box and be trapped in later.

"We have to be creative and innovative, constantly, in our thinking and visionary in the type of changes we're going to need to make 10 and 20 years from now," Williams says.

Williams adds that he sees producers "catching on to marketing" more quickly than he initially expected. "I also see them discovering that there are times they actually need to farm out expertise in areas where they don't have the needed expertise, realizing that if they don't take this step, they can literally get eaten by the wolves," he says.

"Granted, the organic and practical farming world has possibly responded more quickly to this challenge than other producers," Williams offers, "because it's been their thought process since the very beginning. What always fascinates me, however, is that we're actually seeing a lot of this, as well, out of what I would describe as the typical commodity beef producers."

"They are the ones," Williams says, "who are really starting to attend these programs in droves and to start to think along these lines. We now have a significant number of these producers thinking very seriously about reorienting their production to do this type of product."

Beef certification

Ray Kirsch, Midwest certification coordinator for the Food Alliance, has worked with the Germans on certification of their beef cattle herd. The certification is seen as a valuable marketing tool for producers such as German.

"It's one way of distinguishing your products from other products in the market," Kirsch points out. "It allows you to demand a little higher price premium and to perhaps open new markets. It can be important to marketing your product or products as the organic and natural foods growth continues and you are thinking of putting your toe in the water. If you do great stuff, and don't get paid for it, what's the point?"

Kirsch acknowledges that following the organic or natural foods path is not without some extra work. But for those taking the route, there are possibilities.

"There are two things to consider in



PHOTOS BY JOLENE STEVENS

Northwest Iowa cattle producers Tom and Kristi German, left, and Allen Williams, right, of the Jacob Alliance based in Starkville, Miss., explained the opportunities and challenges in raising branded beef at a recent Practical Farmers of Iowa field day.



A crowd of local residents gathered on the lawn of Tom and Kristi German's farm in Holstein to learn more about grass-fed beef production.

making this decision," he says. "Number one, you must be a producer interested in the incentives that are out there for natural foods. You have to be interested in good husbandry and good land stewardship and to keep up on these issues."

"Secondly, you have to be interested in certification and to be comfortable with having your operation evaluated without freaking out when not everything goes as you had hoped," Kirsch says. "I can't say there aren't challenges, but the program can offer greater market access and a great price premium."

"If in instances you do encounter consumer resistance, you still have the opportunity to tell your story and why products like yours should be on menus in perhaps local colleges or restaurants," Kirsch concludes. "There is market interest to the organic and

natural products. Iowa producers once grew 40 to 50 different crops, now the focus is on just a couple. However, I think Iowa farmers are starting to think, to realize they can broaden out, and if they do, it can mean more money for them."

As to the Germans' decision to bring their operation into the organic farming picture, Tom German, observing the field day participants from throughout a quad-state area, and their interest in the day's activities, puts it quite simply.

"It's just something that makes sense to us," he says, "to try to work with nature and the biological systems rather than trends. We are trying to do our best for the consumers of our products."

Stevens is a freelance writer from Sioux City.

Cattle selection important part of marketing

The selection of the right type of beef animal to produce a consumer-desired beef product was the focus of another part of Allen Williams' message to producers.

Using a live animal ultra-sound demonstration as a foundation for his thoughts along this line, Williams stressed the importance of genetic selection and the use of ultrasound to determine heritable carcass traits—ribeye area and shape, potential tenderness, marbling and back fat—for

finding the type of cattle that "will truly thrive in a grass-finishing scenario" and at the same time, produce a beef product "of optimum quality" for the consumer.

As to the right type of animal producers should be looking for with a grass-finishing operation, Williams puts it this way, "It should be an animal that will finish a low choice or better just as we prefer for a grain-finished beef animal, with a back fat finish of 0.3 or better," he says. "This allows it to hang in the cooler and age

a little bit without excessive shrink and exceptional tenderness. We're really big on having a tender product."

"More and more producers are taking advantage of ultrasound to collect this animal data," Williams continues.

"Ultrasound allows them to look underneath the hide of an animal and to see the traits you can't see just by looking at an animal. I'd say use of the technology has absolutely exploded across the United States."