



Harry, a 30-foot Hereford inflatable bull, greeted shoppers outside the Ponca City United Supermarket.

Breeders Promote CHB Launch in Oklahoma Grocery Chain

by *Candace Krebs*

Hereford breeders John and Mona Loewen used to drive from northwest Oklahoma to Kansas City to buy Certified Hereford Beef® (CHB).

"We'd get a big ice chest and go up there to shop," John says.

Starting this spring, the Loewens can buy CHB near their ranch at Waukomis, thanks to a special collaboration

between CHB LLC and United Supermarkets, a state-owned and operated 26-store grocery chain that is nearly as old as the state of Oklahoma. The chain is staffed by hundreds of long-term employees, many who represent multiple family generations.

In a state that boasts the second highest number of Hereford breed registrations nationwide, CHB is a perfect fit.

"I grew up with Hereford meat so I know how much better the taste is," Mona says. "I can tell the difference."

The kickoff event

The Loewens were among several Hereford breeders who participated in a promotional launch to introduce CHB to the Oklahoma market. At a special kickoff event at one of United Supermarkets' flagship stores in Ponca City, the beauty of the collaboration was evident in the way it brought all aspects of the beef business together. By the day's end, John was in the back

of the store cutting up meat with an electric knife under the direction of the store's regional meat manager, Donnie Guerra, a second-generation employee. Outside, store managers, cattle producers, local FFA students and Saturday shoppers mingled on a breezy spring day.

"The customer response has been great," says Ken Gracey, meat

operations director for United Supermarkets, who is based at the company's headquarters in Altus. "It's starting out with a bang. The Oklahoma Hereford ranchers have jumped right in and are willing to help us in any way they can. It's a good thing for us."

"Anytime you can get this big bull up in front of a grocery store, it's kind of a fun thing for the breed," adds Craig Huffhines, American Hereford Association (AHA) executive vice president, referring to Harry, a 30-foot Hereford inflatable bull tethered to the side of the building under clearing skies. Two smaller inflatables and a Hereford information booth also drew shoppers' attention.

Teaming up with United Supermarkets is another big step forward for a program that has witnessed phenomenal growth in the last five years, in line with trends toward more source-verified branded beef, Huffhines says.

He says that in Kansas City, where the AHA and CHB LLC are based, some key retailers are gravitating to the local food movement because of consumer attachment to the idea. He says the concept is just as suited to small- to medium-sized towns across northern and western Oklahoma.

"We're in ranch country," Huffhines says. "They settled it, they found oil, and then they put cows underneath the oil derricks. There's a real strong connection to beef. That's why we're excited about being in Oklahoma. United Supermarkets are in those markets that are in the center of ranch country, where we will see some of our commercial and purebred cattle producers come in and buy their groceries. They are going to walk by that meatcase, and that gives you a sure sense of pride of ownership when you can see a brand that you are participating in producing."

While festivities continued outside, Glenn Purvis, local meat market manager, was in the back of the store behind the meat counter, cutting up boxed beef to keep up with brisk demand.

One benefit of the program is that it gives meat merchandisers a chance to sell beef with a story.

"A lot of people raise Herefords around here and know exactly what they are," Purvis says of the questions and comments he was hearing at the meatcase. "If they don't, I tell them the story of how Herefords were brought over to this country before the turn of the century to help produce more tender beef."

For skeptics who say beef is all the same once you remove the hide, Purvis tells them about modern source-verification and processing technologies.

"Actually, cowboys today are becoming scientists," he tells his customers.

The CHB in his counter is stamped USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) Choice. "It's a little

pricier, but people who want good beef are willing to pay an extra \$1.50 a lb.," Purvis says. "Once our customers eat Choice CHB, they are sold on it forever."

Repeatedly, meat managers throughout the company attributed their enthusiasm to how well the program fits with their image as a full-service, hometown grocery market with "a personal touch."

"See these glass windows?" Purvis asked, gesturing beyond the stainless steel cutting surfaces of the meat department to the store beyond. "I can see my customers, and I can run out there and help someone get something down from on top of a high shelf if I need to. That's the personal touch."

Some of the larger mass-market stores have eliminated meat cutters entirely by using case-ready packaging, but United Supermarkets is proud of the fact that its meat is cut fresh every day. The key for smaller stores is to find a way to differentiate themselves from mass-marketers.

"This is something that I'm really behind," Purvis says of the CHB launch. "It's a good product that we can really take pride in."

Breeder enthusiasm

Participating breeders made a great impression with store managers for their willingness to be involved in the promotional campaign.

"They are very proud of what they do and what they raise, and they are willing to go the extra mile to promote it," says Travis Gracey, who oversees the meat departments in 13 of the company's stores. "I think eventually more of the producers will be out here to meet our customers. It shows they are not just raising cattle; they care about how it tastes at the table. From farm to plate, they are interested in the whole process."

Charles Buckminster, president of the Oklahoma Hereford Association (OHA), who ranches near Lahoma, took time away from spring calving to visit several United Supermarkets locations and to help with product launch events statewide. "Calving season is kind of winding down now," his wife Nancy says in Ponca City. "We have a son and a brother who live close by, and they are helping us watch the cattle while we're gone."

"We're excited about it (CHB in Oklahoma)," she added. "We had to buy some of the Certified Hereford Beef ourselves even though we raise our own."

The Buckminsters are lifelong students of the evolving beef business. They enroll several animals annually in a carcass performance test. Charles takes issue with those producers who are oppositional to changes in the industry, and says he's "willing to do whatever it takes to merchandize the product," including signing up for the proposed national animal identification system.



CHB began appearing in United Supermarkets' meatcase starting March 19.



Members of the Ponca City FFA chapter served CHB smoked tri-tip sandwiches at the north-side United Supermarkets grocery store to earn money for a trip to the State FFA Convention in late April.

"I've been through the Excel packing plant, and I've seen my beef being processed and followed it through to the end," Charles says. Being involved in the product launch allowed him to learn more about what happens after processing. He was particularly interested in learning about in-store aging and the strategies behind product displays. Big banners and posters have been prominently displayed throughout the stores.

"The packaging and how they showcase it in the market is very important because that's what the public sees," he observed. "If you are back there shopping for meat, the display really catches your eye."

Several other Hereford enthusiasts were at the Ponca City product introduction.

Sherry Pope-Smith, former president of the American Hereford Women and active member of the OHA, grew up on a ranch near Bartlesville and now lives in Tulsa.

"I think you do this if you believe in your product. I'm excited to see Oklahoma represented with CHB beef. I think our beef is great," she says.

She's quick to testify for the healthful benefits of CHB. Currently receiving treatment for breast cancer, she says she "eats as much beef as possible" to maintain her health.

"One-third of all cancer patients die from malnutrition," she says. "Protein is key. Your body is made up of protein."

She says she eats beef "once a day," if possible, as part of a varied diet with a lot of fruits and vegetables. "Life's about choices," she says.

The healthful and nutritional attributes of beef were something 2006-07 National Junior Hereford Association President Catie Sims, from Elgin, also brought to the event. The senior at Oklahoma State University, studying nutritional science and pre-nursing, raises cattle with her two brothers and has been showing cattle since she was 7.

"We have to give confidence back to consumers," she says.

"I think USDA and Certified Hereford Beef are doing a good job of making sure beef is safe. We need consumers supporting it," she says. "It's good for you. It's high in iron and protein." With a laugh, she adds, "I think it's better than chicken — chicken just doesn't smell the same," as the aroma of smoked beef wafted across the breezy parking lot.

Another participating breeder Richard Gebhart, of Claremore, says his wife and daughters run the ranch in his family. He and the Buckminsters both point to the docile temperament of Herefords as partly responsible for the breed's recent resurgence in popularity. "The girls work the cattle, give them shots and do the weaning. They do all of it," he says.

"I think this program (CHB)

is great. Hopefully, it will create pull demand for Hereford genetics," he adds. "Recently, I have seen an increase in demand for Hereford genetics."

Out-of-state Hereford breeders were involved in the kickoff, as well. Mary Ann Berg, Dalton, Ohio, was one of two CHB Ambassadors who visited six stores in less than a week cooking and handing out product samples.

She enjoyed seeing the wide-open fields of Oklahoma during her visit and having the chance to interact with a large number of current and future customers.

"They have been very impressed with the tenderness. They've also been very impressed with us stressing the consistency of the product," she says. "Whatever they get today, a month from now, if they purchase it again, they want to know they are going to have that same consistency in tenderness. I think that's really important to people.

"We've also stressed the animal health," she continues. "I think that's an issue for everyone. A few people have talked about that, and I told them that it's a very regulated product. It goes through many specifications before it's here for them to buy.

"It's very satisfying," she says of her role as CHB Ambassador. "I really feel at ease promoting the product because I believe in it so much, so it's a very easy assignment. I've enjoyed it very much."

Generating customers

With CHB LLC Account Manager Shonda Anderson's creative organizing, Ponca City's grand opening event also turned into an opportunity to cultivate a new generation of customers. The local Ponca City FFA chapter was invited to sell CHB smoked beef sandwiches as a fund-raiser in conjunction with the OHA, which earned about \$400 to fund scholarships for the top three exhibitors in the Hereford heifer show at the Oklahoma Youth Expo.

Dee Eschbach, of Skiatook, OHA executive secretary, attended the Ponca City event with her husband Joe. She says the scholarships are a way to reward the hard work of heifer exhibitors who don't have the chance to sell their stock in the prestigious Oklahoma Youth Expo premium sale. Money raised by the OHA is matched with funds provided by the expo.

Local FFA Advisor Kevin Frazier says the chapter would use its earnings of \$1,600 to travel to the State FFA Convention in Oklahoma City in late April.

Rather than preparing a new generation of Hereford breeders, Frazier's program emphasizes consumer education. None of the 110 students enrolled in his program are from traditional farm backgrounds.

"I can't really encourage them to go into production agriculture, necessarily. But maybe they'll be Hereford consumers," Frazier

says. "In the classroom, we spend a lot of time on meat quality. We gear our program more to the consumer end. I want them to make good decisions at the grocery store."

In the classroom, they used the fund-raising project to study the tri-tip cut of beef and to learn what it takes for animals to qualify for the CHB program.

Tara Wild was one of the students who operated an informational table, handing out beef recipe flyers. A woman with kids in tow stopped by for a brief visit.

"She was just asking me what FFA and 4-H was and how to get involved," Wild says about their conversation. "She's just transferred here from the city and she wants to get her kids involved."

Next to Wild, Lauren Hadley was serving as the official sign-maker, drawing handmade posters. Later she was enlisted on the serving line, and both girls say they were eager to help with any part of the event, including warming the pans of sliced meat in big black smokers.

"They are good kids. I'm very proud of them," their advisor says.

The store smoked 400 lb. of meat in preparation for serving up to 1,500 people.

More opportunities for involvement

Looking down the road, Huffhines says the next step is to create an avenue for more producers to become directly involved in the program.

"The breeders are tremendously excited to be part of this kickoff with United Supermarkets, but their next step is to figure out how to get their own calves in this system," Huffhines explains. He'd like to use the launch as a catalyst for additional feeder-calf sales.

"There is a very successful program that was started six or seven years ago in Tennessee, just outside of Nashville, where producers bring their feeders on a given day," he says. "A USDA feeder-calf grader is at the sale. He grades the feeder calves, and then the producers sort the cattle into groups. They've been able to



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CHB Ambassador Mary Ann Berg, a cattle producer from Dalton, Ohio, handed out samples of stir-fried beef and visited with customers about CHB.

get enough volume to attract two or three feedlots to come and bid on those calves. So last October, the group sold 800 head through that and about three feedlots bought them. They brought the top of the market, and it worked out just tremendously.

"In that sale, the calves are tagged with electronic ID. We have a Hereford Verified program that's QSA (Quality System Assessment) approved for age certification so those cattle would even be eligible for the Japanese market, as well as to run through our program domestically," he adds.

AHA staff hopes a similar sale could be started in the Southern Plains region, perhaps in Oklahoma City or Joplin, Mo.

"We're hoping the enthusiasm behind the brand launch in this state will generate the interest at the producer level to start some feeder sales here," he says. **HW**

Hereford Beef on the Table

Seems like all over the nation

Certified Hereford Beef® is coming up in people's conversation

Guess you would like to know the reason

Well, it's getting close to steak and hamburger grilling season

It's not just the taste

With less fat, it will give you more energy instead of going to your waist

For three years running, they put it to the blind taste test

The experts said that Hereford Beef is definitely the best

Some beef has to be high Choice or Prime

Before it is good most of the time

There is something special in that Hereford gene

Makes it taste good when it is Select and lean

For 150 years we have selected for those beef-making abilities of the Hereford cow

As you know they've never been selected to pull a plow

When you go to the store and see that CHB label

Your family will thank you if it ends up on your table



— Jack Fast, April 9, 2007