

# Certified Hereford Beef Meets Consumer Demand

A panel of industry experts shed light onto the positive attributes present in CHB® products.

by Kayla Jennings

Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®) has grown to be one of the most highly recognized branded-beef programs in the country to date. CHB products can be found from coast-to-coast in restaurants and grocery stores and through other food retail avenues.

Alex Tinkle, Merchants Foodservice category manager, says it is one of the best and most competitive tools they have to generate business in an aggressive arena. Merchants has approximately 75% of its inventory invested in CHB to satisfy the consumers, who demand consistency, quality, yield and value in their product.

“At any given time I am competing against 65 to 85 different beef programs,” he notes. “I am competing within the southeast from Louisiana to North Carolina – we cover a quarter of the country.”

With that type of competition prevalent across the country, it is exciting to see CHB rising to the top for those engaged in the beef industry from packer to end user. Restaurant owner and chef Scott Ellinger, The



Brass Rail Steakhouse, O'Fallon, Mo., says implementation of the program has been essential to remaining competitive with other restaurants in the area.

“As soon as I found Certified Hereford Beef and cut it against what we were already selling, it made perfect sense – there is no comparison,” he explains. “One hundred percent of what I have in my refrigerator is Certified Hereford Beef.”

#### Why CHB?

Mike Ritcher, Coborn's Inc. senior meat director, says his company was seeking a program that would differentiate it from all the other packers. “I could have taken a black-hided program, because there are plenty of them out there,” he explains, “But that is the problem, there are too many out there.”

When he visited a ranch in South Dakota that supplies Hereford cattle for CHB, he remembered the consistency of the cattle drawing him into the program. After Coborn's tested the product against others, the company soon found it was

more than consistency. He says the tenderness and flavor were superior, as well.

“It was the best thing I ever did,” he recalls. “It differentiated us from other competitors without a doubt.”

In Tinkle's situation, as a distributor, he is tasked with convincing retailers to make a change by adopting the CHB program. For him marketing is a huge piece of the program success in the retail setting – and it is no easy feat.

“Getting a branded-beef program into a distributor like mine is a huge undertaking,” he explains. “But if you give them the right program, the payoff is substantial.”

Tinkle says the marketing, paired with a consistent product, has been that payoff for his company. Similarly, Ellinger says the consistency and head-to-head cutting with other products were the selling points for his restaurant. He notes a positive influx in his customer base after the introduction of CHB.

#### Consistency is key

As consistency is obviously a large selling point, CHB has 10 carcass specifications that

ensure consistent quality. One of those indicates a ribeye must be between 10 and 16 square inches. Ritcher, Tinkle and Ellinger all agree the size specification is critical to cater to today's consumer.

“Over the years, the consumer has changed,” Ritcher explains. “The habits have become more portion-driven.”

In response to the change, his company began offering smaller steaks, which paid off. “In the end, we sell more tonnage,” he notes. “We sell more units, and we definitely satisfy the customer. Then we have them returning to the meat counter to buy beef.”

Because the ribeye is indicative of the rest of the animal, the size specification assures uniformity in the remainder of the cuts. Any lack in the promised size can result in a monetary and confidence loss for the distributor aiming to sell the product to retailers.

Tinkle says if the box he sells does not comply with the specification, not only does he get a negative phone call, but the buyer may also send back the product. “It goes back to that consistency,” he notes. “The expectation is, even though this is an agricultural product, to be perfect.”

At the end of the day, all changes are led by consumer demand. Ellinger's unique perspective as a restaurant owner allows him to see what consumers want firsthand. He, too, is seeing a demand for smaller ribeyes. However, that doesn't discount the value in uniformity.

“For the restaurant, the most important thing is consistency,” he notes. “Once you get one customer, you want to lock them away to make sure they don't leave then start work on the next one.”

It is evident after hearing from all sectors in the industry, the CHB program provides a consistently high-quality product, which is beneficial from all industry segments. In order to continue to spur the increase in sales with CHB, all panelists agreed – producers must continue to “Demand the Brand.” **HW**



Industry experts representing foodservice and retail segments discussed what happens after Hereford beef enters into the food supply.