



Serving the Story

Certified Hereford Beef® Food Service Distributor of the Year builds upon the brand's grassroots.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

From a Tennessee farm to chef's coats, the man behind the Certified Hereford Beef® (CHB) Food Service Distributor of the Year has been from gate to plate and back again.

Jonathan Wells, US Foods–Atlanta vice president of merchandising and marketing, spent his summers on his family's farm, where they had raised cattle for six decades. There, he fell in love with animal agriculture and, by proxy, the food it produced. After a stint in culinary school, he donned his chef's coat and ran the kitchen of a bed and breakfast before shifting into a more traditional family-style restaurant. These experiences, both in the field and in the kitchen, gave him an invaluable perspective when he joined US Foods as a center of the plate (COP) specialist, working one-on-one with restaurants and providing product expertise and sales support from tastings to valuable market trends. After joining the US Foods team, Wells quickly rose through the ranks, managing categories and vendors in different regions before landing back in the south in his current vice president role.

The story behind the brand

Wells' summers on his family's farm uniquely positioned him to appreciate the story behind the CHB brand — the only Hereford-branded

beef program owned by an alliance of Hereford breeders. But, as Wells learned, *Certified Hereford Beef* is more than a good story; its consistent, earthy flavor separates it from Atlanta's Angus-dominated beef market. With a flavorful, consistent product backed by the Hereford breed's

genetics, Wells arms the US Foods' Atlanta sales team and COP specialists with the tools needed to tell the CHB story and help it stand out in one of the most complex and competitive protein sectors — beef.

In his mission to transform his team from salespeople into culinary storytellers offering a quality product, Wells has a wealth of support from the CHB team. As a professional who cut his teeth promoting a very large beef brand, Wells was frankly surprised when the newer and seemingly more

grassroots *Certified Hereford Beef* offered his team powerful resources to help grow the market share in their region.

"The CHB team has always been there to help with whatever it is we needed. If we wanted to meet with a rancher and train our team, they showed up with all the bells and whistles. If we needed to run a promotion with our team, they always helped me build something impactful that moved the needle," Wells says. He notes CHB's publications, reminders and training tidbits not



Jonathan Wells, vice president of merchandising and marketing for US Foods–Atlanta, which was named the CHB Food Service Distributor of the Year.

only keep the brand top-of-mind for his sales staff but also continue to grow demand with end users.

Powerful partnerships

Brands are often only as good as those who stand behind them, and *Certified Hereford Beef* curates powerful partnerships between the brand and its distributors and the Hereford producers and consumers.

“These partnerships are absolutely vital to the life of the brand, its success and its continuation,” says Ty Ragsdale, CHB brand manager. “CHB has a small sales team, so it is crucial to have those partners, like US Foods–Atlanta, to be the feet on the ground.”

US Foods–Atlanta, with Wells’ leadership, shines even among a list of dedicated licensed CHB distributors. The team garnered the CHB Food Service Distributor of the Year by moving the most volume of branded product during the fiscal year, which is unsurprising to those who have watched their rise. Since US Foods–Atlanta partnered with CHB in 2019, after being introduced to the brand by National Beef’s Terry Thornton, they have grown their sales by 30% each year, according to Ragsdale.

This rapid and consistent growth further serves as a testament to the power behind these brand-distributor partnerships.

“Jonathan and US Foods have been the most cooperative and best ambassadors for the brand in the history of the brand. He has totally embraced it and has worked so well with CHB management and the National Beef team,” Ragsdale says. “With his culinary background, Jonathan has an incredible understanding of the whole protein category. He is a problem solver for the customers and a master at teaching new salespeople about the beef category. He breaks it down to the basics until his staff is confident in selling these products.”

Wells also views his culinary background and unique understanding of the marketplace as an advantage.

“I understand what our customers are going through on a daily basis and their challenges, such as being short-handed, putting out a consistent, high-quality product and keeping people coming back,” he says. “Those are the challenges that I lived with every day for years. So, in every role,

I’ve always kept that in mind, that whatever I’m doing has to help them solve problems daily.”

Back to the roots

Being successful in the culinary world means stacking up days of working hard to provide consistent, quality products until those days become months and then years. In that respect, culinary professionals easily relate to beef producers.

“Anybody who works directly with animals has a whole lot of patience. You’re not just going to do something today and see the results. Oftentimes,

“The CHB team has always been there to help with whatever it is we needed. If we wanted to meet with a rancher and train our team, they showed up with all the bells and whistles. If we needed to run a promotion with our team, they always helped me build something impactful that moved the needle.”

— Jonathan Wells, US Foods–Atlanta

it’s going to take years of consistent work,” Wells says, recalling his family’s farm. “[The farm] gave me a lot of background going into the world and helped me remember where our food comes from. In today’s society, some people think food comes from a restaurant, a store or a manufacturer, but none of our food starts there. It starts with a family and a farm.”

Wells was reminded of that fact once again when he visited the American Hereford Association. While touring the Kansas City, Mo., office, he had the honor of peeking back into the archives of pedigrees to find his great-grandfather’s herd sire from decades ago.

Wells’ story overlaps many of the Hereford producers that stand behind the *Certified Hereford Beef* brand because, it too, starts with a family and farm, and Wells and US Foods–Atlanta have the honor of connecting that story with the consumer with every flavorful CHB steak that lands on a plate.

“And that’s a very good story to tell today’s consumers,” Wells concludes. **HW**