



Passages

Sustainable Food and Farming Systems

Newsletter of the
Pennsylvania
Association
for Sustainable
Agriculture

Serving the Community of Sustainable Farmers, Consumers and Businesses Throughout Pennsylvania and Beyond

Number 74

September/October 2008



Grand Champion Harvest Home Meats, Richard DiFebo and family with their trophy.

Beef Cook-off Successfully Steers Palates toward Grass-fed Beef's Superior Flavor

By Lori Baer

While their tastes may differ, judges of PASA's inaugural Grass-fed, Grass-finished Beef Challenge Cook-Off held August 3 agree that the idyllic pastoral setting and sustainable philosophies of Glasbern Country Inn in Fogelsville, Lehigh County, Pa., along with a sold-out crowd of beef eaters made for a wonderful educational experience.

A tasting contest featuring 13 PASA-member contestants who raise 100% grass-fed and grass-finished cattle was the main event. Delmonico steaks grilled by Glasbern Inn chefs were judged by a panel of 10 chefs, food writers, and food professionals.

"I was very impressed with the beef competition — very organized, and I certainly learned a lot," said cook-off judge Carol Stoudt, owner of Stoudt's Brewing Company in Adamstown, Pa. which also donated two craft beers for the event. "It was very

interesting to just judge one type of food, and I was amazed at the difference in taste, look, and texture in the beef. It was also great to get to meet the farmers and talk to them about their farming practices. I have a great appreciation for the farmers and their commitment to raising pasture-raised meat."

Entry qualifications required animals to be raised on their mother's milk for a minimum of 60 days, but with a preference for up to 10 months. Once weaned, the animals' diet must be any combination of grass, legumes/forbs and herbs or stored feeds made from grass and legumes such as hay or haylage. Animals may be finished on grass or stored grass forage feeds. Prohibited in this diet are grains, corn silage, and animal and fish by-products.

The prize of grand champion went to Rich DiFebo of Harvest Home Meats located in Northampton County, Pa. Rich has



Pictured here are five of our ten judges:

Diane Stoneback, Food Editor Morning Call;
Renee Catacalos, Editor, Edible Chesapeake;
Sean Weinberg, Chef/Owner, Restaurant Alba;
Tom Sherman, Philadelphia Slow Food; and
Royce Smith, Executive Chef, LaSalle University.

been raising grass-fed, grass-finished cattle for 12 years and was surprised to come home the overall winner.

"I really didn't know how my beef ranked against other farmers producing grass-finished beef, and the win kind of caught me off guard. My family went with me, and on the way down I said not to be surprised if we don't come close to winning. Who would have thought I'd come in first place, so I was quite excited and happy."

Rich credits his win to paying attention to the details.

"Once you master the basics, it's then fine-tuning the details. It's not just one thing, and you have to continuously have green forages for grazing. When things go dry, you have to have something else them to eat. I plant summer annuals also for the cows to graze on. You always need to have constant growth. You can't have any time when the cows aren't gaining any weight and to do that you have to have something out there for them to eat all the time."

The cook-off's first place prize went to Dr. Bill Elkins from Buck Run Land & Cattle Co. located in Chester County, Pa. Dr. Elkins, retired from a career in medical science, and has been raising grass-fed cattle for approximately 15 years and shares his insights with fellow PASA cattlemen.

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Beef Cook-Off

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"We had a lot of trouble getting off the ground at first, but even if you get some really tough critters, don't throw in the sponge. Just keep trying, and eventually things seem to work out. In the beginning, we had some meat that was very off-tasting and that people didn't seem to much like. I was always afraid that we would keep getting it, but it never happened again. I can't begin to tell you why, so you just have to hang in there is all I can say."

Dr. Elkins also mentions he's a firm believer in farmers breeding and raising their own calves as the best way to advance a grass-fed cattle enterprise over the long term.

"You need a steady source of animals where the people who are breeding them are doing it for that purpose, and I think it must be very hard to go out and buy a bunch of stockers and hope that you are going to get what you want. I also realize that what I'm suggesting may be expensive, because it means you need more land. And you need to pay attention to the bull, and maybe buy a little better bulls, and stuff like that, or go into artificial breeding. Not everybody is going to go for that, but I personally believe it is the best way for the long run."

The cook-off's second place prize went to Larry Herr of Cressbrook Farm in Lancaster County, PA., and third place winner was Ridge Shinn from Out of the Woods Farm in Hardwick, MA.

"Every piece of meat we were served at the cook-off was a steak that I would pay money for," noted Renee Catacalos, *Edible Chesapeake* magazine publisher and editor. "None of them had any off-putting gamey flavors, although they did vary quite widely in their flavor. So my conclusion is that the overall quality of grass-finished beef must be rising as farmers are learning more about best practices in raising animals on grass."

Providing consistent, palatable tastes and textures is

a challenge. John Jamison of Jamison Farm, another cook-off judge and a nationally known Pennsylvania lamb farmer, speaks from experience.

"As I finish lambs on grass, the whole process is not unfamiliar to me. I am, however, very impressed that the producers have found the correct genetics in the cattle to allow them to produce such a superior product on grass. I don't think they could have had the same results 10 years ago. It is as much an art as it is a science. The stockman must know his animals and his pasture."

Cook-off judge Tom Sherman from Slow Food discovered "farmers raising grass-fed and finished beef have learned how to produce a more tender meat. In the past, proponents of grass-fed beef have focused their arguments on health — of consumers and of the environment; chewy meat seemed to be a trade-off for flavor and health. Farmers have understood that concern and are developing ways to raise beef that's tender too."

The Britton Brothers band, which included PASA Vice President Brian Moyer, entertained guests as they grazed on burgers and Stoudt's beer-braised beef stew. Amidst the breathtaking beauty of Glasbern, event-goers mingled with judges, farmers, and fellow PASA supporters, and nibbled on potato chips donated by Snyder's of Hanover, Hanover, Pa., licked cones of farm-made, hand-dipped ice cream sold by The Lands at Hillside Farm, Shavertown, Pa., or sipped homemade birch beer from Kutztown Bottling Works, Kutztown, Pa.

Indeed, the setting was ideal, and PASA extends its gratitude to event spon-



PASA would like to congratulate our inaugural cook-off winners:

Grand Champion

Harvest Home Meats
Bangor, Northampton County
610-588-7141

First Place Winner

Buck Run Land & Cattle Co. LLC
East Fallowfield, Chester County
www.buckrunfarm.com
610-486-0789

Second Place Winner

Cressbrook Farm
Lancaster, Lancaster County
www.cressbrookfarm.com
717-519-7174

Third Place Winner

Out of the Woods Farm
Hardwick, Massachusetts
www.hardwickbeef.com
413-477-6500

sor Al Granger of The Glasbern Country Inn for generously donating his beautiful property. Glasbern's working farm spans 100+ acres and uses sustainable agricultural practices such as rotational grazing and organic farming to raise vegetables, sheep, cattle, and chickens for the Inn's restaurant.

PASA also thanks other event sponsors Agri-Dynamics Inc., The Fertilizer Company, King's AgriSeeds, Leona Meat Plant, Natural By Nature, and Friends of the Cook-Off supporter American Herbataurus Society.

Through educational activities and undeniably delicious beef, the cook-off demonstrated how it's no bull that improved quality and flavor result from raising cattle using grass-fed, grass-finished methods. Together, everyone involved gave life to a unique event that succeeded in being a memorable showcase of grass-fed, grass-finished beef and the hardworking stockman who provide high-quality, flavorful meat for our enjoyment.

"The farmers' dedication to raising delicious and healthy meat is impressive. The commitment of the crowd to support their work is equally impressive," adds Sherman. "The event confirmed that people who support producers of sustainable food are themselves not just consumers but co-producers." ■

Relaxing with PASA's Bossie the Cow are event sponsors Jerry Brunetti (center) of Agri-Dynamics and Chick & Mike Debach of Leona Meats.