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MARKETING A WAGYU EATING EXPERIENCE

Jeff and Michelle Ball, Brant, Alta.

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Brandon Ball and his parents Jeff and Michelle currently run 270 head of pure and percentage Wagyu.

MARKETING A WAGYU EATING EXPERIENCE

The Balls introduce Brant Lake Wagyu beef

Jeff and Michelle Ball and their son Brandon launched their new Brant Lake Wagyu beef brand in April, fulfilling a family vision that has been in the works since Jeff's dad Jack brought the first load of Wagyu genetics to their Brant, Alta., farm in 1993.

At the time the Wagyu breed that originated in Japan was a hot item in the seedstock trade but the commercial appeal of the Wagyu highly marbled beef was slower to develop. So when BSE hit people started culling their aging Wagyu stock at a rate that nearly wiped out the breed in Canada, except for a few stalwarts.

The Balls continued to use Wagyu genetics and bulls from the U.S. in their crossbreeding program, adding about 20 replacement heifers each year to breed up the purebred and percentage herd that currently runs about 270 head, backed up by a substantial database of performance and carcass merit for calves fed out in Ballco Feeders' feedlot.

"It has always been our goal to get into a branded beef product because we have never found a similar beef-eating experience ourselves. We kept

dabbling into it to a small degree selling Wagyu beef to family, friends and staff and they always commented on how different Wagyu beef tastes," says Michelle, who handles the beef-marketing end of the business.

The difference in the taste of Wagyu beef is due to the abundance of fine marbling fat throughout the muscle. It absorbs into the meat during cooking to create very tender beef with a distinct rich, buttery flavour. Readers may be familiar with Kobe beef, a Wagyu beef brand from the Kobe region of Japan.

The official launch of Brant Lake Wagyu was really quite incidental after so many years in the works, according to Michelle. The owners of The George Traditional House restaurant in Okotoks had been looking for a way to pump up their beef menu and, having heard about the Balls' Wagyu beef, approached them about the possibility of supplying product for all their beef entrees.

The relationship with The George was a great starting point, adds Michelle. They gained both experience in the marketing end of the business and time to work through the logistics

of managing for a year-round supply along with the processing, packaging and labelling of their product so the Brant Lake Wagyu brand can grow from a solid foundation.

"It took us out of our traditional areas in the production cycle because now we have to understand all aspects of pasture-to-plate production, distribution and retailing," Michelle explains. They started learning the ropes by networking with other producers who have built brands and with potential restaurant and retail customers to find out about their requirements.

"We felt that we can't afford to experience downfalls along the way, so we hired a consultant with experience in branded beef products to guide us and answer questions in order to constructively move forward," Jeff adds. "Now we have also developed a plan on how to go forward on the production side and how to expand using concepts that fit well with the traditional beef system."

The Balls are interested in developing business arrangements with cow-

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calf producers to rear the calves, which would allow them to eventually move out of the cow-calf end of it, freeing up their resources to raise bulls, finish the calves and market the beef.

Their program is flexible and they are open to working with cow-calf producers from any region with herds of any size and any breed, but preferably of Angus influence. The Balls will supply Wagyu bulls with first option on the calves, or sell the bulls outright.

Jeff expects it will take time to expand their program because cow-calf producers still look at traditional market signals that encourage them to shoot for maximum pounds per cow and maximum price. On the other hand, there are people who will be interested because they want to be part of something different.

He sees Wagyu bulls as an excellent fit for a replacement heifer program because of their ability to consistently throw lightweight, vigorous calves that are quick to get up and go. What the producer gives up on birth and weaning weight is gained back by having a higher percentage of live calves and a premium in their system, he explains.

Marbling has been their main criterion for selecting bulls through the years. Down the road as the bull program expands they will select for other characteristics including growth. They select for black hair coat, however there are red lines of Wagyu cattle with the red gene being recessive.

Other traits that the Balls appreciate include the cattle's winter hardiness due to their ability to readily deposit fat as well as the docility of the Wagyu bulls, which is unlike anything they have experienced with bulls from other breeds.

On the finishing side, the Wagyu-percentage calves express that same hardiness, weather-wise and health-wise. They consistently grade Canada AAA or higher, yielding an 800- to 850-pound carcass when finished after 250 to 350 days on a traditional grain-based feedlot diet without growth hormones. The beef is dry-aged for 21 days resulting in flavour and an eating experience very much the same as that of Wagyu beef from the U.S., where the calves are fed 400 to 500 days. Brant Lake Wagyu's



The abundant marbling is what gives Wagyu its distinctive taste.

strategy is to maximize carcass quality while keeping an eye on production costs.

"The timing for branded products in North America is good. The unique quality of Brant Lake Wagyu will be a fit for 'white tablecloth' restaurants and provide the 'home foodies' with a high-quality eating experience," Jeff

Wagyu percentage calves consistently grade AAA or higher, yielding an 800- to 850-lb. carcass after 250 to 350 days on feed

comments. "Before this trend, the only differentiation in beef was the store where you bought it. Now, we are seeing producer beef brands like Spring Creek, Prairie Heritage, and many organic beef labels having success because consumers are looking for variety."

Consumers are also becoming aware of the role of fat in a balanced diet and the difference between healthful and harmful fats. Recent research from the University of Alberta, supported by findings from France and Denmark, shows that natural trans fats found in the meat and milk from ruminants differ from "industrial" trans fats created through processing. No adverse effects linked to consuming natural trans fats

have been found and they may, in fact, benefit human health.

The Balls highlight other favourable research specific to Wagyu cattle showing that the breed is genetically predisposed to depositing a high percentage of unsaturated fat and that Wagyu beef is an effective source of omega-3 and omega-6 essential fatty acids.

They participate in Canada's producer-led Verified Beef Production program to provide customer assurance of food safety at the farm and feedlot levels.

Brant Lake Wagyu is currently processing two to four head a week at a provincially licensed plant with plans to work up to about 10 head a week in the foreseeable future. Their beef is available from Bon Ton Meat Market in Calgary and featured at restaurants throughout the city.

Moving all cuts and the grind (trim) hasn't been a stumbling block because restaurant chefs are coming up with tasty recipes to make use of the entire beef, Michelle adds. The grind is very flavourful and juicy and has become a specialty product in itself.

"We will continue to constantly build relationships with distributors, retailers and restaurateurs, while ensuring our production system is intact and our brand is what we say it is — 'superior beef bred and fed to be the best,'" Jeff says.

For more information, visit www.brantlakewagyu.ca or call 403-684-3540.

— Debbie Furber 