



Gearing up for grilling season

By Steven Knudsen/On the Farm

Summertime grilling season is upon us, and from barbecues around the Central Coast plumes of smoke rise and float along backyard fences, enticing neighbors to wonder: What's cooking?

It's not atypical to hear grill masters pondering the benefits of Santa Maria red oak over the old stand-by charcoal briquette or boasting of British thermal units - BTUs - roaring on a new gas grill.

And there are always seasonings, rub or sauce, injection or brine, so many different options, in fact, that often the true flavor of the meat of choice is overlooked entirely.

But why worry about the flavor of the meat when you have South Carolina vinegar, teriyaki or Cajun jerk, mango salsa and chipotle cream?

The beef producers in San Luis Obispo County would disagree. They argue that flavor, tenderness and marbling are just as important as the plate on which the steak will be served; that the flavoring of the meat itself and the smoke of the pit from which it is grilled is all that is desired in their perfect steak.

In the hills north of San Simeon just off the rugged coast, Hearst Ranch is developing a herd the ranchers feel produces one of the best sides of beef on the Central Coast.

Entirely grass-fed and free-range, the Hearst Ranch cattle graze on 80,000 acres, making it one of the largest working cattle ranches on the California Coast.

The land on which the cattle roam will remain as-is in perpetuity, largely because of one of the largest land conservation easement efforts in California history between the California Range Land Trust, the American Land Conservancy and the state of California that successfully protected it from development.

When ranchers are left to run their operations without outside pressures of development, exciting things happen.

Cliff Garrison, ranch operations manager and San Luis Obispo County Cattlemen's Association president, has been employed with Hearst Ranch since 1986 and took over the management of the ranch in 2000.

Garrison has selected his cattle to best fit the land by crossing heritage breeds - certified Angus and Hereford with short horn.

“Selective breeding has allowed our cattle have greater mobility and (they) are able to graze on grass alone without relying on secondary supplements,” Garrison said.

“The management and stewardship of the land for the last 150 years has allowed for high-quality perennial grasses to grow in abundance on the ranch.”

The plentiful forage of native perennial and annual grasses is what is said to produce high-quality, lean beef. Scientists feel the beef is nutritionally better for you.

“Scientifically, grass-fed beef contains three times more omega-3s and conjugated linoleic acid, which are both beneficial in combating cancer cells in the human body,” said Roland Camacho, Hearst production manager. “The meat also has up to 10 times more beta-carotene.”

A high concentration of beta-carotene in the marbling of the steaks gives the fat a lower saturation concentration and, therefore, a lower melting point, which means grass-fed beef cooks faster than conventional beef.

Hearst Ranch beef comes with cooking suggestions to help the consumer properly prepare the product.

The majority of the beef produced at the Hearst Ranch is harvested between April and July, just in time for the summer grilling season.

The cattle are held for two seasons until they reach the average market weight of around 1,000 pounds.

Today's technology comes into play in tracing and identifying each animal.

“Each cow has three forms of ID,” Camacho said. “We have radio frequency identification tags on each of animals, allowing us to store a tremendous amount of information on the animal.”

The information is not only beneficial for the producer but also the processor and, ultimately, the consumer, as each cut of beef can be traced back to the animal and ranch where it was produced.

The information is also used to verify the ranch has earned from the American Humane Society, Food Alliance and Good Housekeeping Promise certifications.

To market their product, Hearst Ranch has developed a kiosk at the Hearst Castle visitors center to promote cattle ranching, the beef industry and Hearst Ranch-branded beef.

“The branded beef program started in 2006 as a way for us to market our grass-fed beef away from the commodity market,” Garrison said. “We stand behind the product that we produce, and I am excited to put our name on every steak we produce.”

Hearst Ranch has also developed an online store, www.hearstranch.com, and currently ships its products - overnight - across the continental United States.

Each vacuum-packed and flash-frozen steak is packed in a cooler box with dry ice and sealed shut, ensuring that consumers receive their product still frozen.

As for flavor, both Garrison and Camacho said their beef has a unique flavor that is not found in most commercial beef.

Hearst Ranch Beef enjoys a loyal consumer base of both local and national food enthusiasts and chefs who are looking for a unique product that not only tastes great but provides a healthy alternative to commodity beef.

Ultimately, these cowboys just want to be cowboys. Garrison and his staff are practicing their version of sustainable beef production.

As stewards of the land, they have a passion for their industry and the product they produce.

Garrison's philosophy of "let cows be cows" prescribes allowing the animal to roam in plenty of space with abundant forage. He believes that practice is as close to historical cattle ranching as they can come.

Garrison hopes that through their work on the Hearst Ranch, the entire industry will benefit: "Promoting the consumption of beef and creating alternatives for the industry to market is just another way for us ranchers to continue ranching and keep the industry going strong."

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