

# Lean Flavor – Challenging the American Palate

By Abigail Chapin

Oh, Beef. With beef featured in taglines of advertisements, health warnings, environmental damnations, public land debates, personal gluttony, and national pride, finding clarity within cattle ranching at times resembles the search for keys at the bottom of a backpack – confusing, exhausting, and somewhat hopeless. Instead, let us examine how a few small, brick-colored cows could help solve the increasingly muddy dilemma of cattle ranching.

Daniel Kosel of Deer Park, Washington, grew up with reverence for classic western cowboys and the beef that they loved. With direct and secondary ranching experiences in south central Montana, his philosophy was shaped by empathy for small ranchers. “Many beef producers can have multiple years with negative bottom lines, so the financial challenges facing beef producers today many times can outweigh the generational values and lifestyle benefits afforded to farmers and ranchers,” says Kosel.

He decided to start Cowboy Classic Naturals, L.L.C. with the goal to create a financially sustainable ranch by raising an environmentally sustainable product. As a believer in natural and homeopathic medicine, Kosel has a deep understanding of the state of American health and the importance of preventative medicine as well as a preventative lifestyle. “We are living

in a country rich with resources, and I believe that grass-fed beef is the healthiest, tastiest beef on Earth.”

However, in order to be an economically feasible ranch, Kosel needed to understand the grass-fed beef market. There is no denying that the American palate has been trained to love grain-fed beef. As Kosel attests, “Marbling is the foundation of the U.S.D.A. meat grading scale popularly relied upon by most beef market producers and consumers. Anything a producer can do to create a beef carcass with better marbling is considered favorable.”

With a premium on texture over flavor, pleasing the American palate poses issues. While a market for grass-fed beef exists, the product is usually treated with skepticism by those unfamiliar with it. Grass-fed beef, as a general rule, is perceived as tougher than conventionally produced beef. How could Cowboy Classic Naturals’ small grass-fed operation create a culinary and financially viable product while maintaining the health and environmental benefits of grass fed beef?

Enter the Red Poll bred.

These quiet, red cattle were brought to the United States in 1873 after great success in England where they are nationally treasured. The Queen of England personally owns the largest herd in the world on the royal family’s estate in Sandringham, United Kingdom. Red Poll cattle have since gained popularity in the United States based on their mellow personalities and limited pasture needs. Their even temperaments and delightful spirits were clear incentives to raise the cattle, but more importantly the finished product has the potential for high market value. Kosel comments, “Simply put and based upon the research and



**Chef Jamie Guerin of Whitehouse Crawford Restaurant in Walla Walla, Washington, prepares Red Poll beef for a gathering of chefs, winemakers, foodies, and ranchers. Photo by Daniel Kosel.**

experience I have obtained, I believe that the Red Poll cattle breed is the ultimate small farm or ranch ruminant.”

Kosel’s decision to raise Red Poll cattle started with the intent to find a breed with an affinity for grass feeding and finishing. Currently, the cattle industry is more or less dominated by the Angus and Hereford breeds. This dominance is due largely to these breeds’ capacity for growth and marbling when fed grain. However, relying on just a few breeds may be detrimental if industry demands, infectious disease, or other factors alter our food system.

As Kosel explored his cattle breed options, the impetus to diversify became clear. “The best way to ensure a future other than decline and extinction for these beautiful ruminants is to teach and promote their breeding and consumption potential to our private and commercial customers.”

Searching the culinary market for a restaurant willing to feature grass-fed Red Poll beef, Kosel approached Jamie Guerin, chef/owner of Whitehouse Crawford Restaurant in Walla Walla, Washington, to determine the commercial viability of this heritage breed beef, raised on such a small scale, within the culinary industry.

Chef Guerin has been working in the restaurant industry for over 20 years. Before opening his own restaurant in Walla Walla, he worked at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC, and then as the sous-chef at restaurant Campagne in Seattle for



**Because heritage breeds cook and taste different from mainstream breeds, it’s important for chefs to experiment with the unique cooking qualities and tastes these breeds exhibit. Pictured: Red Poll beef. Photo by Daniel Kosel.**

six years.

Whitehouse Crawford was opened in May of 2000 by owners Sonia and Carl Schmitt and Chef Guerin. The goal of the restaurant is to use classic techniques and the highest quality ingredients to allow for creativity, adventure, and satisfaction. A longtime supporter of local production, Chef Guerin believes "If you know the producer, there's a better confidence in the quality of the product."

While Chef Guerin expressed interest in carrying Cowboy Classic Naturals' beef, he also wanted to truly understand the product before agreeing to purchase it. Kosel also felt the need to better understand his cattle's culinary viability from the perspective of a chef. Thus, they organized a tasting including winemakers from Cadaretta, Lullaby, and Flying Trout vineyards, local foodies, ranchers, and chefs. They convened to determine the true difference of Red Poll beef, based on a variety of experienced palates, and a direct comparison with other breeds.

To fully understand the restaurant industry's beef needs, Kosel and Chef Guerin chose a blind tasting of the competition. They compared Cowboy Classic Naturals to the same cuts from a nearby grass-fed Hereford cattle ranch, and grain-fed "Rancher's Reserve Certified Angus Beef." Tasters were asked to judge each tenderloin, rib-eye, and tri-tip based on flavor, color, smell, fat content, and aftertaste, and each was asked to rate each producer in accordance with the RAFT Tasting Protocol.

Chef Guerin presented the beef simply. He salted and peppered the dark brown beef before grilling each product. A thin char encrusted the beautifully red meat. Earthy aromas and smiles filled the dining room. Roasted potatoes, beet salad, and Red Poll oxtail soup and short ribs rounded out the meal while providing further context to the Red Poll flavor. As forks danced with knives to carve perfect bites, conversation yielded to satisfied sighs.

Cowboy Classic Naturals consistently scored higher than its competitors on every cut, based on every attribute. Throughout all the comments by chefs, vintners, and locals, Red Poll was described as "lingering, succulent, natural, lush, intriguing, subtle, and persistent."

Chef Guerin made the choice to purchase nearly 200 pounds of sirloin, brisket, tri-tip, chuck roast, flank steak, ground

beef, and rib-eye, among others. In coaching his servers how to introduce the dish, he warns, "the beauty of this beef doesn't just come from pure tenderness. This is a balance between flavor, texture, aroma, health, and color."

While featuring Red Poll cattle was an easy choice, working with a limited capacity, rare breed conservationist posed its own challenge. Mainly, there is not enough product to feature a single cut. For Whitehouse Crawford, which routinely orders eight entire tenderloins in a week, this poses a particular challenge to the very framework of the restaurant. Consumers rarely grasp the seasonality of beef, and when supply fluctuates, it is difficult to keep demand steady.

However, Chef Guerin sees this as an opportunity. "Where there are so many fine dining restaurants and they are all offered the same product, they all run into each other. Restaurants are trying to find something that separates them – that makes them unique. Working with things such as this requires that I be creative which will interest guests."

Furthermore, he believes that restaurant goers will have more confidence in a chef who features different parts of the animal. "It's easy for a chef to just buy a bunch of beef tenderloin and do some simple preparation. It's a lot more challenging and it takes more skill to take rump roast and make it beautiful." Meanwhile, Chef Guerin can act as the sounding board for what

he wants in the product, educating both producer and consumer. If he wants the beef finished at an earlier age or prefers a custom cut, such as a primal, he can work with Kosel to optimize the carcass.

Red Poll made its restaurant debut at Whitehouse Crawford on August 29, 2010. Chef Guerin grilled the sirloin with salt, pepper, and extra virgin olive oil. To allow a pure review of the product itself, Chef Guerin placed the grilled Red Poll on a plate all its own, with a drizzle of olive oil. On separate plates he served a guajillo chili butter and local corn with cherry tomatoes, cream, and chardonnay. While reviews of grain-fed beef traditionally focus on texture, the reactions to the Red Poll overwhelming commented on the stunning flavor of the meat. "You mean there's no rub? It's just salt? Amazing!"

So what else will Chef Guerin create with the steaks, roasts, ground beef, and briskets in his freezer? "We'll do specials. We'll make salads. We'll make pastrami. We'll confit. We'll braise." Well, we'll be waiting. ♦

*For more information about this project, contact Cowboy Classic Naturals L.L.C, Daniel and Theresa Kosel, (509) 954-0417, ccnaturals@yahoo.com, www.ccnaturals.com.*

*For more information about the Red Poll breed, contact the American Red Poll Cattle Association, PO Box 43515, Louisville, KY 40253, (502) 475-7850, arpa@americanredpolls.com, www.redpollusa.org.*



**Studies conducted at the Meat Animal Research Center (MARC) in Nebraska showed that the Red Poll led all breeds in 200-day calf weight per cow bred. Red Polls accomplish this by superior fertility, calf vigor, and calf growth rates. The breed has been praised for the quality of its beef. Photo by Daniel Kosel.**