

Maine Farms Hope Naturally Raised Beef is a Hot Commodity

by: KERI FISHER, *Globe* Correspondent

Although locally raised, natural beef may not sound like a novelty, unfortunately it is. Boston area chefs who try to support local vegetable farming as much as possible find themselves looking west for high quality, naturally raised beef. One man in Maine hopes to change that.

Erick Jensen, farm manager of Wolf's Neck Farm in Freeport, first got the idea for a New England beef cooperative after reading about a similar cooperative in Oregon. About ten farms throughout Maine are involved in the project, all raising cattle according to strict guidelines that include no hormones, steroids, or animal by-products in the feed. The 2,000 to 3,000 head a year of Angus and crossbreed cattle are then processed and marketed through the Wolf's Neck Farm brand, a name that has been associated with natural beef since the 1950's. The cooperative has been marketing the beef for several months. Last week, Boston chefs got a chance to sample the cooperative's product at a tasting at the Blue Room in Cambridge. Chef and co-owner Steve Johnson, the first Boston chef to sign on to the project, grilled steaks as Jensen talked. The beef is also on the menus at Hamersley's Bistro and at Fore Street in Portland and other Maine restaurants.

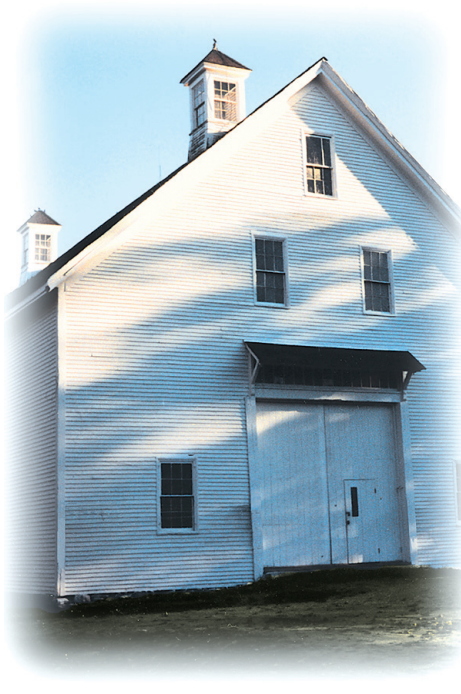


Chef and owner Tony Ambrose of Ambrosia on Huntington began the tasting by picking up a piece of beef with a pair of chopsticks. Everyone else in the room quickly followed

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The Boston Globe

April 3, 2002 Food Section



suit, using fingers, forks, or any means necessary to get the beef to the mouth. Johnson stood behind the counter, pointing at the two plates as each person approached. "Strip steak, rib eye," he repeated, until everyone in the room had sampled both.

Michelle Jacaruso, co-owner of the Epicurean Meat Market in the South End, was one of the few to actually put her small piece of beef on a plate. She cut it easily with the side of her fork, pronouncing the beef "amazing." She added: "We'll definitely be able to sell this."

Though his initial reaction to the beef was positive, Bob Sargent, chef and owner of Flora in Arlington, one of many local chefs who serve Niman Ranch natural beef from the West Coast, isn't reprinting his menus yet. "For a long time Niman's been the only game in town," he said. He plans to do a side-by-side comparison with Niman Ranch "before we go whole-hog - so to speak." Chris Douglass, chef and owner of Icarus,

doesn't often feature beef on his menu, but when he does, he uses Niman Ranch. Douglass said he would try Wolf's Neck Farm as a special.

After the initial sampling of the two steaks, lunch was served: a portion of rib eye, a portion of strip steak, both grilled, with sides of mashed potatoes and salad. While Ambrose admired the taste of the beef, he said he was wary of committing to an unproven product. "We want to support local farmers, of course," he says. "But at the end of the day the customers want consistency and don't want to gamble with their dollar."

Wolf's Neck Farm beef is available at Bread & Circus markets in the Boston area and at Hannaford's Supermarkets along the New England coast. It's not the first farm to offer naturally raised beef in New England, but the first to give it this kind of distribution. Other small farms ship meat directly to restaurants.

Whole Foods Markets sell naturally raised, hormone and antibiotic free beef from a number of different sources, but none of them are branded. At Fore Street in Portland, a double Delmonico steak for two from Wolf's Neck costs \$55.

That may be important to Boston chefs, but when it comes to Dewar's retail customers, he admitted, they "just want a good piece of meat."



Delicious

Naturally Raised Beef

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