

Local beef, hold the anxiety Farms offer natural meat, full of flavor but not additives

By Alison Arnett, Globe Staff | July 6, 2005

RIMFIELD -- The June sun is beating down on the grassy pasture, but the white-faced Herefords and black Angus steers look cool and comfortable under the spreading branches of a big tree, lazily chewing their cud, tails switching away insects.

"There's lots of shade in this pasture," says Jon Konove, who owns River Rock Farm with his parents, Ron and Kay. As he surveys the cattle, he explains that these animals, about 1,200 pounds each, have been raised on grass for about 15 months and are in the finishing stage when their diet is supplemented with hay, corn, and soybean meal. The farm here, Pineland Farms Natural Meats in Maine (formerly Wolfe's Neck Farm), and a few others are making it easy for New Englanders to dine on beef raised in the region without antibiotics or growth hormones. Both Pineland and River Rock also use no animal byproducts, one of the probable causes cited for mad cow disease, in their feed. In an era of food supply anxiety, says Konove, this is what customers are looking for.

River Rock's dry-aged steaks, roasts, ground beef, and sausages are wrapped in white paper and sold from coolers at farmers' markets in the summer and fall. Often, Konove sets up a grill and offers samples to passersby. At \$15 a pound for sirloin steak and \$5.45 for lean ground beef, the cost is considerably higher than commercially raised beef, but a taste is convincing: meaty, flavorful, and far from the stringy qualities once associated with grass-fed beef and the bland taste of some supermarket meat. Even Konove's ground beef, aged along with the steaks and roasts, has full, rounded flavor. It's beef as we might remember from childhood.

Eating more naturally and locally is gaining ground here. But until recently, New England naturally raised beef was not readily available. Now you see it at farmers' markets, on menus, and in some supermarkets. Besides appearing at farmers' markets, River Rock is delivered to homes and is featured at Davio's in Boston and Cambridge and other restaurants. Pineland, which still packages under the Wolfe's Neck Farm label, is sold at Whole Foods Markets, some Hannaford stores, and restaurants such as 902 Main in South Yarmouth on the Cape.

There owner Gilbert Pepin praises Wolfe's Neck meat for its "beautiful marbling." He's featured it for several years. "I believe in trying to get as close to the source as I can," says the chef. Phil Peterson of Specialty Foods, which sells River Rock Farm beef to restaurants, says he's stopped selling better-known Niman Ranch beef because he believes in the River Rock product. And he loves the taste.

At River Rock Farm, about 75 head of cattle graze on rolling pastures spread over about 50 acres and are never confined in barns or feedlots except when they're just born or ill. Calves aren't weaned until nine months and feed mainly on grass, with hay and a little corn in winter. "We don't push as hard on corn" as a conventional feedlot operation would, Konove says. Without growth hormones, the cattle gain weight slowly. On the other hand, they don't have the digestive problems that commercial feeding of corn can cause, and because the cattle aren't confined or stressed by shipping, they don't need preventative antibiotics to reduce illnesses. The beef is processed at a small butchering operation, Blood Farm in Groton, which handles only six to eight head of cattle a day, important in making sure the meat is safe.

Konove, 28, majored in biology at Pennsylvania's Haverford College and planned to become a veterinarian. As he and his father became involved in raising beef in the late '90s, the son deferred vet school several times and then decided not to go at all. "I do this because I love being out here and spending time with the cattle," he says as he strokes the muzzle of Bullwinkle, a young bull who will be used for breeding.

When the Konoves started raising beef after years of growing and selling hay, they had no idea if customers would go for their meat. "It wasn't like we thought there was a market," says Jon Konove, who does most of the caring for the animals, sales, farmers' markets, and deliveries around Boston, while his father does general management and helps out with animal care. They started selling at the markets to gauge customer interest. Although natural or grass-fed beef has been available, mostly by mail order, it often doesn't come in fresh and frozen individual cuts, like River Rock's, but must be purchased as a whole side of beef.

Last year, River Rock did more than \$300,000 in sales, and Konove says he expects growth of more than 15 percent this year. Yet it's a small operation, and he sees it growing only about 50 percent in the future. "I don't need to be

huge," says Konove. "Basically, what we're focusing on is a better product." He has two things to sell: "how we're raising the animals and the quality of the product."

Maine-based Pineland Farms Natural Meats has a dual purpose -- to sell meat and keep land in agriculture. The company, which took over the assets of Wolfe's Neck Farm in May, sells cattle for more than 50 producers in several New England states and a few outside the region. Farmers are required to raise cattle, mostly Angus, according to specific guidelines. Besides raising natural beef, the program, says Pineland president Eric Jensen, 39, is a way to "put land into production." Maine "is such a forage-rich state, prime for cattle. We can grow grass with the best of them."

But small farmers have trouble staying on the land, especially when there are pressures for housing or other development. Pineland Farms had \$12 million in sales last year and has been experiencing a growth rate of 70 percent a year; Jensen says that rate will slow to about 30 percent this year. While Pineland can help small farmers reach high-end markets, the company's program also allows land to stay in agriculture and farmers -- from a small producer with five head of cattle to an Aroostook County grower with 2,000 -- to have a sustainable future.

It also tells customers that their meat comes from a real place. As Jensen says: "The consumer really puts a face on the food." People are cut off from agriculture, he thinks, and what they hear in the news tends to frighten them. Like River Rock, Pineland cattle eat grass as long as possible, then are finished in small feedlots on grain, hay, and some corn and soybean meal.

Jensen was raised on a small family farm in Wisconsin. Keeping land in agriculture is important to him, but a philosophy alone won't sell beef -- natural or not. "Obviously, you need to produce a product that consumers want to buy," he says.

"If it doesn't taste good, they won't come back." ■