

## **Beef Cook-off Successfully Steers Palates toward Grass-fed Beef's Superior Flavor**

By Lori Baer

While their tastes may differ, judges of PASA's inaugural Grass-fed, Grass-finished Beef Challenge Cook-Off held Aug. 3 agree that the idyllic pastoral setting and sustainable philosophies of Glasbern Country Inn in Fogelsville, Lehigh County, Pa., along with a sold-out crowd of beef eaters made for a wonderful sustainable agriculture educational experience and a vibrant conversation between producers, consumers, and key influencers.

A tasting contest featuring 13 PASA-member contestants who raise 100 percent grass-fed and grass-finished cattle was the main event. Delmonico steaks grilled by Glasbern Inn chefs were judged by a panel of 10 chefs, food writers, and food professionals.

"I was very impressed with the beef competition—very organized, and I certainly learned a lot," said cook-off judge Carol Stoudt, owner of Stoudt's Brewing Company in Adamstown, Pa. that also donated two craft beers for the event. "It was very interesting to just judge one type of food, and I was amazed at the difference in taste, look, and texture in the beef. It was also great to get to meet the farmers and talk to them about their farming practices. I have a great appreciation for the farmers and their commitment to raising pasture-raised meat."

Entry qualifications required animals to be raised on their mother's milk for a minimum of 60 days, but with a preference for up to 10 months. Once weaned, the animals' diet must be any combination of grass, legumes/forbs and herbs or stored feeds made from grass and legumes such as hay or haylage. Animals may be finished on grass or stored grass forage feeds. Prohibited in this diet are grains, corn silage, and animal and fish by-products.

The prize of grand champion went to Rich DiFebo of Harvest Home Meats located in Northampton County, Pa. Rich has been raising grass-fed, grass-finished cattle for 12 years and was surprised to come home the overall winner.

"I really didn't know how my beef ranked against other farmers producing grass-finished beef, and the win kind of caught me off guard. My family went with me and on the way down I said not to be surprised if we don't come close to winning. Who would have thought I'd come in first place, so I was quite excited and happy."

Rich credits his win to paying attention to the details.

"Once you master the basics, I think it's then fine-tuning the details. It's not just one thing, and you always have to continuously have green forages for grazing. When things go dry, you have to have something else there for them to eat. I plant summer annuals also for the cows to graze on. You always need to have constant growth. You can't have any time when the cows aren't gaining any weight and to do that you have to have something out there for them to eat all the time."

The cook-off's first place prize went to Dr. Bill Elkins from Buck Run Land & Cattle Co. located Chester County, Pa. Dr. Elkins, retired from a career in medical science, has been raising grass-fed, grass-finished cattle for approximately 15 years and shares his insights with fellow PASA cattlemen.

"We had a lot of trouble getting off the ground at first, but even if you get some really tough critters, don't throw in the sponge just keep trying and eventually things seem to work out. In the beginning, we had some meat that was very off-tasting and that people didn't seem to much like. I was always

afraid that we would keep getting it, but it never happened again. I can't begin to tell you why, so you just have to hang in there is all I can say."

Dr. Elkins also mentions he's a firm believer in farmers breeding and raising their own calves as the best way to advance a grass-fed cattle enterprise over the long-term.

"You need a steady source of animals where the people that are breeding them are doing it for that purpose, and I think it must be very hard to go out and buy a bunch of stockers and hope that you are going to get what you want. But I also realize that what I'm suggesting may be the expensive way to go because it means you need more land and you need to pay attention to the bull and maybe buy a little better bulls and stuff like that or go into artificial breeding. Not everybody is going to go for that, but I personally believe it is the best way for the long run."

The cook-off's second place prize went to Larry Herr of Cressbrook Farm in Lancaster County, Pa., and third place winner was Ridge Shinn from Out of the Woods Farm in Hardwick, Mass.

"Every piece of meat we were served at the cook-off was a steak that I would pay money for," noted Renee Catacalos, *Edible Chesapeake* magazine publisher and editor. "None of them had any off-putting gamey flavors, although they did vary quite widely in their flavor. So my conclusion is that the overall quality of grass-finished beef must be rising as farmers are learning more about best practices in raising animals on grass."

Cookbook author Tara Mataraza Desmond agrees. Her book, *Almost Meatless: Recipes That Are Better for Your Health and the Planet* co-authored with Joy Manning, is due out in spring 2009 and emphasizes eating lesser quantities of meat by focusing on higher quality products that go further in meals.

"A lot of people say it's going to take American palates so much longer to adapt to grass-fed beef because Americans are so used to our factory farms friends' flavor, but after eating nearly an entire steak in the end, the whole time I thought that I can't think of a single soul who loves beef and loves steak who wouldn't love any of these. I think that that is another important spotlight that was shed that day in that this is really terrific meat—it's very high quality, the flavor is fantastic, and at the root of it, it is so much more enjoyable all around because it is such a better product."

Marilyn Anthony, event coordinator and PASA's southeast regional director, explains that the event aimed at encouraging farmers to raise the standards of their grass-fed products and exciting the public about locally available grass-fed beef. Growers learned from each other, guests experienced first-hand the superiority of grass-fed beef, and sustaining connections between growers and eaters were formed.

Take for example Diane Stoneback, cook-off judge and food editor for Allentown's daily newspaper *The Morning Call*, who is giving grass-fed beef a second chance because of her PASA experience.

"I have traveled a great deal to Great Britain and in the late 80s and early 90s their beef was grass-fed, and I personally did not like it. To me it had an extremely gamey flavor, I knew I wasn't eating the beef I was used to, and it was distasteful to me. So given that, I personally would never have tried the grass-fed beef again if it hadn't been for this event and my curiosity."

LaSalle University's Executive Chef Royer Smith who also sat on the judges' panel made his own discoveries at the cook-off.

"The beef is better than I expected, and its flaws were different than I expected. It was good to know how aware the farmers are of what they still have to work on, and to find out what their tactics are."

Providing consistent, palatable tastes and textures is a challenge. John Jamison of Jamison Farm, another cook-off judge and a nationally known Pennsylvania lamb farmer, speaks from experience.

“As I finish lambs on grass, the whole process is not unfamiliar to me. I am, however, very impressed that the producers have found the correct genetics in the cattle to allow them to produce such a superior product on grass. I don't think they could have had the same results 10 years ago. It is as much an art as it is a science. The stockman must know his animals and his pasture.”

Cook-off judge Tom Sherman from Slow Food discovered “that farmers raising grass-fed and finished beef have learned how to produce a more tender meat. In the past, proponents of grass-fed beef have focused their arguments on health—of consumers and of the environment; chewy meat seemed to be a trade-off for flavor and health. Farmers have understood that concern and are developing ways to raise beef that's tender too.”

Throughout the day, the sun shined bright and music floated through the summer air as PASA Board Vice President Brian Moyer and his friends in the band The Britton Brothers entertained guests as they grazed on burgers and Stoudt's beer-braised beef stew. Amidst the breathtaking beauty of Glasbern, event-goers scattered around tables and picnicked on the grass overlooking the pond as they met and mingled with judges, farmers, and fellow PASA supporters, and nibbled on potato chips donated by Snyder's of Hanover, Hanover, Pa., licked cones of farm-made, hand-dipped ice cream sold by The Lands at Hillside Farm, Shavertown, Pa., or sipped homemade birch beer from Kutztown Bottling Works, Kutztown, Pa.

Indeed, the setting was ideal, and PASA extends its gratitude to event sponsor Al Granger of The Glasbern Country Inn for generously donating his beautiful property. Glasbern's working farm spans 100+ acres and uses sustainable agricultural practices such as rotational grazing and organic farming to raise vegetables, sheep, cattle, and chickens for the Inn's restaurant.

PASA also thanks other event sponsors Agri-Dynamics Inc., The Fertrell Company, King's AgriSeeds, Leona Meat Plant, and Natural By Nature, and Friends of the Cook-Off supporter American Herbataurus Society.

Through educational activities and undeniably delicious beef, the cook-off demonstrated how it's no bull that improved quality and flavor result from raising cattle using grass-fed, grass-finished methods. Together, everyone involved gave life to a unique event that succeeded in being a memorable showcase of grass-fed, grass-finished beef and the hardworking stockman who provide high-quality flavorful meat for our enjoyment.

“The farmers' commitment to raising delicious and healthy meat is impressive. The commitment of the sold-out crowd to support their work is equally impressive,” adds Tom Sherman. “The event confirmed the Slow Food principle that people who support the producers of sustainable food are themselves not just consumers but co-producers.”

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### **Grand Champion**

Harvest Home Meats

Bangor, Northampton County

610-588-7141

**First Place Winner**

Buck Run Land & Cattle Co. LLC

East Fallowfield, Chester County

[www.buckrunfarm.com](http://www.buckrunfarm.com)

610-486-0789

**Second Place Winner**

Cressbrook Farm

Lancaster, Lancaster County

[www.cressbrookfarm.com](http://www.cressbrookfarm.com)

717-519-7174

**Third Place Winner**

Out of the Woods Farm

Hardwick, Massachusetts

[www.hardwickbeef.com](http://www.hardwickbeef.com)

413-477-6500