

NUFFIELD SCHOLARSHIP STUDY TOUR REPORT

The Eating Quality of Beef

By Donald MacPherson [Primestock Show Exhibitor and former Smithfield Winner]

Introduction:

My wife, Sarah, and I have three sons, Murray (17) Nicol (14) and Ross (4), and we are tenants on a 450 acre mixed arable/stock farm near Berwick-upon-Tweed. The stock comprises 90 beef suckler cows (mainly pedigree) and 400 breeding ewes (120 pedigree Texel, 280 mules). The arable operation is carried out by my neighbours on a stubble-to-stubble contract. I confess that I have little interest in agronomy!

Prior to, and during, Foot and Mouth, all prime stock were sold on a deadweight basis. Having sold off all of my cross cows for restocking at the end of the Foot and Mouth crisis, I restocked with mainly pedigree cows to supply our new venture – “Well Hung and Tender”. No, not pornography! Retailing our traditionally reared beef at Farmers’ Markets. This has been a real eye-opener for me, and the subsidy-junkie farming lad has had to learn quickly about selling into the real market. The consumer is king!

While on my travels, the running of the farm and the meat business fell on Sarah’s shoulders. How she managed this, alongside the endless cleaning up after the boys, I shall never know.

Background:

There hasn’t been a lot of fun in farming over the last ten years; hefty rents, profits disappearing, increasing bureaucracy, and BSE. The Foot and Mouth outbreak was the catalyst that pushed Sarah and I into selling our own beef at the Farmers’ Markets. I couldn’t bear to sell our Highland Show bullocks for £1.65kg/DW. Beef in the supermarkets hadn’t come down in price and, anyway, you couldn’t be sure if it was fantastic, mediocre, or downright awful.

All our beef is home produced and grass-fed. The animals are killed locally, hung on the bone for 3-6 weeks, and butchered and packed locally. We now have eight regular Farmers’ Markets and whilst our marketing leaves a lot to be desired, we have a loyal and expanding customer base.

There is a demand for Tender, Tasty Beef – Every Time.

How many times have you bought a steak or a roast, cooked it, chewed it, chewed it again and then dumped it? Maybe not many, but just once is too many times. All too often on the stall we hear, “I would eat more beef if I knew it would be good” and, “I’m too scared to choose a steak when we’re dining out, in case it’s tough”. As an industry we have to face it;

1. we have safe beef
2. we have some excellent beef
3. but, we don’t have consistently excellent beef.

This is the rationale behind the Beefeater chain sourcing all their striploins from Australia – consistency. We should be able to supply this market. With this in mind, I decided to apply for a Nuffield Scholarship to allow me to find out why the Australians and the Americans can produce consistently good eating beef. The study tour was an incredible experience.

Study Tour:

As with most other UK cattle farmers, I was blissfully unaware of the structure and practices of the UK beef industry. As soon as my prime beast left the farm, my involvement in the supply chain ended! For my overseas tour to be of any benefit I realised I had to understand the workings of the whole of the UK supply chain. This involved meeting producers, processors, retailers, research and marketing bodies such as; MLC, QMS and the IGD and, of course, consumers. The lack of information flow along the chain was clearly evident.

Australia:

Australia was an obvious choice for studying eating quality as their MSA grading system is world renowned and widely recognised. Much of my time was spent investigating the workings of the MSA system and its impact on retailing, consumer acceptance, processing protocols, on farm practices and breeding programs. I also attended a one-week course run by the Co-operative Research Centre for Cattle and Beef Quality (CRC) in NSW which was hugely informative.

Good luck and persistence allowed me to spend three days with Rod Polkinghorne from Victoria. He is credited with being the driving force behind the MSA and eating-quality revolution in Australia. With him, I was party to an MLA meeting in Sydney where the politics of exporting the MSA technology and Intellectual Property was discussed in a typically frank and open Australian manner.

The tropically adapted Bos Indicus type cattle of Northern Australia are of little relevance to the UK beef market, so my travels were limited to the main beef-producing areas of Queensland, NSW and Victoria.

United States of America:

I'd never been to the USA, but everyone who visits comes back with the same story, "what wonderful steaks". This, it occurred to me, was a statement worth verifying! Using Denver as a base, my studies took me to the main meat quality research centres at Colorado State University and the Meat and Animal Research Centre in Nebraska. Both centres have vast resources in terms of personnel, research data, land and cattle.

I was lucky enough to spend a long weekend on a cattle ranch in Wyoming and witness calf branding and horse castration at first hand! I also met many feedlotter, farmers, processors and retailers.

The USMEF and the USDA Grading Dept. in Denver were also very helpful and worthwhile. No visit to the US would be complete without experiencing the vastness of Texas. Here, I witnessed all the links in the Nolan Ryan Tender Aged Beef marketing process.

The highlight of the US tour was the BIF Conference in Kentucky where 420 delegates met for 3 days. This was invaluable in terms of learning but, more importantly, contacts.

Conclusions:

1. Globalisation is here to stay. The UK cannot compete with South America, Africa and Australia in terms of commodity beef. We have to differentiate our beef and sell it at a premium over commodity beef. For this to be successful, we must guarantee quality and safety.
2. Branded beef can be extremely successful in adding value, but claims made must be backed up. For example, Specially Selected Scotch Beef is marketed as superior beef, but where are the controls to ensure it doesn't taste like leather?
3. In terms of eating quality, the USA and Australia are 10-15 years ahead of the UK.
4. UK beef carcasses are graded (and paid for) on yield alone (EUROP grid). No measurements of eatability are taken. As such, no premium is paid to producers for better eating beef.
5. American and Australian grading systems (USDA and MSA) identify and sort carcasses and cuts into different levels of eating satisfaction, allowing consumers to buy with confidence.
6. Customers pay more for better quality beef. The added value element is shared right along the chain. The producer is rewarded for supplying a value-added product – Value-Based Marketing.
7. US and Australian producers are consumer focused. They have to be. There is no subsidy crutch for them. Decoupling of subsidy from production will eventually bring UK producers closer to the consumer. However, mindsets can take a long time to change!
8. In the US and Australia, there is a clear understanding of the protocols involved in maximising the eatability of beef at the producer, processor and retailer level. All parties have a common interest and work together towards it. why?
9. \$\$\$.... The better the beef, the bigger the cheque. Government and industry funded research in the US and Australia, over the last ten years, has focussed on eating quality. The focus of research funding in the UK over this period has inevitably been on BSE and, more recently, Foot and Mouth. The good news is that much research on eatability has been done and is available to us.
10. Industry leaders and government departments in the US (USDA) and Australia (MLA) have grasped the concept of:
improve eating quality improve consumption improve returns
11. They are totally market led.
12. The comparative bodies in the UK (DEFRA, QMS, MLC) appear to be more concerned with rules and regulations relating to subsidy claims, and pandering to the needs of the supermarkets. The Big Five do sell 70% of the fresh beef produced in the UK, but do they put the interests of the UK beef industry first? Of course not – they have an obligation to their shareholders. Let the MLC and QMS work with them in a constructive manner, but let's not be dictated to.
13. The UK industry has some huge advantages over the USA and Australia:
 - A world renowned brand name, e.g. Scotch Beef
 - Abundant supplies of grass – what could be more natural?
 - A huge market on our doorstep for non-growth hormone implanted beef.
 - A discerning and wealthy consumer base who demand quality.

14. A chance to regain the title "British Beef is Best".

- The opportunities are there.
- The future is bright.

Recommendations:

- For the UK beef industry to be profitable and sustainable in a global market, we must become price-makers, not price-takers: - get out of the commodity market and into niche or branded beef markets.
- Back up the integrity of brands with a robust grading system that has eating-quality built-in. Drop EUROP and buy into MSA.
- Suspend current research projects into eating quality (the wheel has been invented!) and buy into MSA.
- Measure the quality attributes of beef such as marbling and tenderness and feed-back the information to the producer to allow genetic improvement. ("If you don't measure it, you sure as hell can't improve it" – Dr. K. Belk)
- Increase the number of carcasses that eat well by improving on-farm practices – genetics, nutrition, handling, transport, welfare, temperament, castration, age and fat level at slaughter, vitamin E supplementation, Genestar technology, ultrasound scanning and EBVs.
- Belly-clipping is bad for man and beast, stop it now!
- Increase the number of carcasses that eat well by improving processor practices: - lairage, stress, handling, "H" bone hanging, rinse and chill, electrical stimulation, considerate chilling, ageing.
- Producers must now become consumer focused (due to decoupling of subsidy from production) – produce for a market, think of each animal as 600 meals.
- Processors must get closer to the consumer, the retailers and the producers – improve information flow up and down the chain.
- Remove some mistrust in the chain by forging alliances based on open-book accounting – win/win situation.
- Make food safety a priority and highlight the health benefits of including beef in the diet.
- Conduct an independent national audit and set goals. Implement regular reviews to see how well we're doing.
- Increased consumer demand for consistently good beef leads to better returns for all parties.
- **So, get the product right first, and then market it!**