

“Focus on what we produce”

Christoph E. Weder – SVR Ranch Consulting

I don't know if I am going to open another can of worms and I don't think I have the solution but it will feel better to at least get it off the chest. The last 6 weeks have taken me through a hectic pace and even more so for Erika as she has been holding down the home front. I have travelled through three continents meeting with importers, distributors, retailers and chefs selling and marketing the beef wares from my band of merry ranchers. Saying that I have gained another level of perspective is an understatement. It's good to get away from the herd and to look back because often times I think I hear too much of the “it ain't Alberta it ain't beef” BS, which most seem to believe.

What got me started on this was reading that last BIC report that announced that now only 20-25% of the time consumers are having a bad eating experience with beef! How pathetic is that! I don't know about you but if I had to buy a product that failed 2-3 times out of 10, I wouldn't be buying it. It definitely makes me start to understand why consumers are choosing chicken over beef; it may not taste like much but at least it's consistently that way. Worse yet about the beef production cycle we invest an average of 27 months from the time a cow is bred till there is a calf ready for slaughter.... A long investment time for creating a product with that kind of failure rate.... So who is at fault?.... In a sense we all are in some form or another.

Let's start at the cow/calf level.... I think for the most part the calves and yearlings being produced are very good and have the genetic potential to make top quality world class beef, however then the corners start getting cut. Where?... I think for the most part at weaning. There is still a segment in this business that thinks they can make a living from selling weaned calves... I will let them think that, however the way those calves are weaned sets the stage for producing either great beef or jerky... I always like use the analogy of selling freshly weaned calves through the old fashioned auction market system is like throwing a dozen eggs in a cardboard box & driving with them in the in the back of your truck to town. How many do you think will be cracked and or broke by the time you get there? All the effort that has been spent too breed, calve and raise them right goes out the door when we do this. But this is the way granddad and dad did so I guess we'll keep doing it.

Then they make it to the next step the feedlot, where it's all about fattening them faster, harder and bigger in the name of producing it cheaper.... Just look at all the ads in this magazine.... It's all about Band-Aids and tricks of the trade used to manage cost and mask poor management... Doesn't anyone ask what this does to the product we are producing which is beef? Oh yes that's right we are not producing beef we are producing fat cattle, let's forget about producing a product for end users that performs consistently. To the respect of the feeders I understand the dilemma; nobody is willing to pay for quality or at least at the feedlot gate level.... Packers are the ones that have that ability; however they are a creature of their own as well.

Packers are about pushing volume through the system in order to get economies of scale and the margin is created by reducing costs and pushing through volume....Price driven....selling on quality and consistency actually takes effort and hard work, most of all it takes time.

In order to create quality, consistency and value within our beef production system the connection needs to be made from birth to box and then to the BBQ. Why am I ranting on this is because I have spent a considerable amount of time with end users of Commodity Canadian beef that say they are looking to other sources because it lacks consistency of tenderness and is bland with poor flavor... The chefs ask me why is this?, when other countries like the US and Australia are pulling off some really good products from branded programs... I tell them because the commodity based beef business in Canada is a dysfunctional family that has not figured out how to work together... My solution? I don't know and as Erika tells me a lot not my issue to solve you have enough going on. Maybe it's time to figure out what we are all producing.

Dr. Christoph E. Weder is a purebred Angus breeder in the Peace region of Alberta and also runs SVR Ranch Consulting. He is also a founding member of Prairie Heritage Beef Producers For additional info check out www.spiritviewranch.com