



THE SPIRITED VIEW

Ranch gate to five-star plate

Month long tour aimed at promoting specialty Canadian beef around the world



CHRISTOPH WEDER

One week into a month-long marketing trip to Switzerland, Sweden, and Dubai and it's hard to believe how much can happen in a short period. But, then again in Switzerland punctuality is the culture and everything so far has gone just like clockwork.

Other than bringing in some sample product on a visit last fall, the beef sent to Switzerland for this marketing trip was our first major export of beef into the European continent. We are virgins in the export business, however, I know while having a reliable domestic distributor network is important, having an equally reliable importer abroad is critical.

So I was ecstatic to be able to strike a deal with VB Foods last fall to look after our beef imports here in Switzerland. What fascinated me most about this young, dynamic company was their vision of where food trends were going rather than where they are today. Price is always an element of discussion within every business partnership; however to them quality, traceability and environmental friendliness of the product were even more important

There are many exporters of beef into Switzerland, however Australia, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil and the United States supply the lion's share. Because of the duties and tariffs placed on beef imports, the primary cuts that enter the country are high valued in the form of loin and rump sets. Highly marbled and fed beef enter the country under a high quality beef certificate. With a high quality beef certificate importers can import exclusively the highest valued cuts; mainly tenderloins, strip loins, and ribeyes.

Just like U.S. beef and some Australian beef, graded Canadian beef also qualifies for a High Quality Beef certificate. This however also in effect means my product will be compared to and in competition with U.S. and Australia beef.

Exporting into a market where little is known about Canadian beef without a marketing plan is like driving, drunk and blindfolded. So to make a mark, differentiate, and get some momentum in sales it was essential that we also promote the program. That is why I am on a two week "Rock the Alps Beef Tour." I'm promoting, tasting and meeting with five-star chefs as well as potential retail customers for our program. The reception has been incredible to say the least!

The day after I landed I had my first tasting and presentation. I was a bit nervous; after all this



Chefs from the Post Haus Restaurant in St. Moritz, Switzerland preparing Heritage Angus ribeye for a taste sampling by 30 chefs during the Rock the Alps Beef Tour.

ing with our product. Metzgerei Angst had organized 60 top end chefs from hotels and restaurants in and around Zurich to attend. They were invited to our wine and cheese event, with my beef food styled for display and the room was decorated to tell the story of our brand. There was a sampling prepared after our presentation to taste our products and a ribeye steak to take home and try for themselves. Never in the five years of marketing beef in Canada had a distributor gone to these lengths to help promote our product. I guess this is the Swiss and European difference. There is actually an appreciation for quality rather just an appreciation for price as I so often have to deal with.

The next day our tour moved to the Canadian ambassador's residence in Bern, which is the capital of Switzerland. I have had many experiences working with bureaucrats and for that matter public servants, however, Ambassador Robert Collette and his staff definitely did not fit the stereotype. For the past eight months his staff have worked steadfast in helping to pave the way and cultivate my relationships with potential Swiss importers and end users of our product. For this white-tablecloth event we had several Swiss officials equivalent to the CFIA in attendance as well my partner importers and Chris McSorley who coaches the Geneva hockey team. Chris and his partners are planning to open a 350-person capacity restaurant in Geneva with a Canadian flair and of course Canadian beef on its menu if he can get a supplier.

It was an unbelievable ambience; a wine and cheese, a meeting in a historic mansion and a dinner serving our beef while overlooking Bern's most beautiful vista the Aare River and the old medieval part of the city. The evening stirred the stomach and the mind.

Next it was off to St. Moritz for another tasting in another equally impressive setting. The Swiss Alps are surrounded by some of the country's most exclusive five-

star hotels and restaurants. Our event was held at the Post Haus Restaurant and attended by 30 chefs. There I was also privileged of meet with Gian Peter Niggli who is an Angus breeder in the Engadine valley next to the airport where the world's Super elite land their private jets. He had a very nice herd of registered Angus cows — small by Canadian standards — however large within the Swiss realm. He was very excited that we were promoting Angus beef in the Swiss market because he too is a big believer in branded beef programs.

By bringing our brand into the market we now helped elevate the Swiss Angus Beef brand and could also help them secure a steady supply of Angus beef into high end food service market. I was thoroughly impressed with his professionalism, his vision of branding and the ways in which he added value to his farming

operation. He is both a proud producer and a proud marketer of his products. It is something that we need more of in agriculture.

All these meetings and events happened in the first three days of my tour. Needless to say, there are many more stories I could recount, however, one underlying theme that emerged from these events is that "Food is part of the Culture and Culture is part of the Food." To be successful in this market we will always need to be cognizant of it and never forget with it. To be successful in this market requires professionalism, accountability, and due diligence. Only then can we connect our ranch gates to the five-star plates.

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



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPH WEDER

Rancher/writer Christoph Weder, center, with Peter Schnyder, left, of VB Foods importers and Gian Peter Niggli, right, a Swiss Angus breeder and promoter of Swiss Angus Beef in front of the Hotel Donatz in Samedan, where they proudly serve Swiss Angus beef.

elements. In fact every supplier of beef they deal with is graded for environmental stewardship, animal welfare and for the working practices within the packing industry.

was my first event and the first time I had ever done a presentation in German. The event was held in the dining facility of one of the major food service distributors who will be work-

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