



Raise the steaks

By Miranda Reiman

The consumer. As a beef producer the title conjures up all kinds of images. Perhaps you see a couple of city slickers, dressed in evening attire and paying high dollar to eat at an upscale New York restaurant. Maybe you think of a mother, three or four generations removed from the farm, trying to make food choices for her family.

Tonight you'll meet these consumers. They're coming to supper at your place. No need to clean the house or shine your boots, because he or she is actually a guest at your table almost every evening.

It's you.

Most cattlemen have a personal favorite cut of beef. Maybe you like a healthy portion of prime rib or a tasty bit of tenderloin. No matter which one, you know how you like it. It should be cooked a certain way, and done beyond that just won't do. You want it to have a certain flavor and tenderness, and if you go to a restaurant, they'd better watch out for your scrutinizing taste buds.

You don't usually go into a steakhouse expecting a tough piece of meat with only a slight degree of marbling. Other consumers don't crave it either. Producer-funded research shows our ultimate customers will pay more for better-marbled and tender steaks.

The difference between you and 98% of other consumers is that you actually have some power over what kind of beef goes on the plate. Others simply have to eat what's for dinner.

That's an incredible responsibility—not to say burden—but it carries an important message. If you know what you like to eat, that's what you should raise. Find out how your whole population of cattle deliver on your ideal and then look for ways to make them better.

Say it's time to work cattle at the ranch. At first the stubborn calf won't budge a lick. Your hired help twists his tail, wallops on him with a paddle and finally resorts to the hot shot.

The calf leaps closer and, after repeating the same routine several times, makes it into the chute. There the young steer goes into a panic, banging himself against every piece of metal on the

contraption as you try to get him caught. After that struggle he's finally vaccinated, dewormed and completely identified.

"Whew! I'll be glad to get rid of that critter," you say to yourself. But when you send him down the road you're not rid of the problem. You still have his mama and the handling routine that made that calf a problem.

And in a larger sense, that problem calf is putting a damper on beef demand. Disposition difficulties will likely follow him through the feeding phase and show up in the end as a lower-quality, dark-cutting carcass.

A bruised, off-color steak is not what you want to cook up for company. You want to get that tender, sizzling steak off the grill in perfect form: carved up like it came from a five-star restaurant, with a taste just as elite.

You make dozens of choices every day that will ultimately hurt or help beef quality. From feeding, health and implanting strategies to genetic decisions and even marketing avenues, you can increase consumers' satisfaction with beef or leave them disappointed.

If your daily decisions are related to an overall plan for improvement, they can contribute to an overall increase in beef demand. That's all built on the idea of giving consumers a positive eating experience they won't soon forget.

With several production and processing steps between you and your customers, how can you be sure of what they want? It's probably close to what you want, Mr. or Mrs. Beefeater.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Steve Suther will consider commodities. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail mreiman@certifiedangusbeef.com.

END