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NEWS

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Photos available

Ray's becomes 'destination' grocer with CAB

Most of the news about supermarket meat cases is oblivious to quality, focused on a continuing price war. One small retail chain based in Clay Center and Manhattan, Kan., is taking the high road around those battles.

As you might expect, the family that operates Ray's Apple Market knows produce. But this isn't really about apples; it's more about the beef, and how a friendly, small-town approach to the grocery business competes against the likes of Wal-Mart, Target and other giant retail chains.

"We do it with quality and service," says Mike Floersch, who functions as an informal CEO for the family from his Clay Center office. Other locations are in Council Grove, St. Marys and Seneca, Kan., and Fairbury, Neb.

"We make it a point to build on local connections," Floersch explains, "but we don't expect anybody to buy from us just because we're local. We'll earn their business because that's the kind of stores we have."

Shoppers may drive many miles to Ray's new superstore, because the next-closest retail partner for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand is nearly 100 miles to the east.

When Ray's held its grand reopening in west Manhattan store this spring, staff from the nearby CAB office helped inform shoppers about this original producer-owned brand. The Kansas State University Cattlewomen's Club also helped distribute coupons and brochures.

Tom Floersch oversees the new store, along with a downtown location in Manhattan. He's on the same page with his brother on business strategies. That's why there is no "commodity beef" in Ray's. Customers can buy prepackaged in a natural brand, or step up to a more highly marbled brand at the service counter.

The idea is to build on "destination" products that shoppers will come back for, rather than shop for the bargain basement, says Nick Thompson, meat case and sales manager for Ray's stores. "Certified Angus Beef differentiates us from the competition," he notes. "We're giving consumers the opportunity to buy high-quality beef products."

The Floersch brothers learned meat cutting from their father, Ray, as part of a family tradition that goes back to when the name was associated with grocery, post office, farming and grain elevator

businesses. Indeed, the store's "RockHouse" label is in reference to Floersch family early settlers in the tiny village of Flush, Kan.

Thompson also picked up meat cutting as a schoolboy more than 40 years ago with a part-time job in Wakefield, Kan. Quality meat is central to the team's business philosophy.

"We're excited to have this partnership and thrilled to have a CAB office here in this same town to help us get the ball rolling," Thompson says. It helps to have high-profile, successful restaurants in Manhattan and Council Grove that serve only Certified Angus Beef steaks, he adds. "Now, shoppers can enjoy that steakhouse quality at home."

Gale Rhoads, based in Colorado, is the CAB executive account manager who works most closely with Ray's and other area accounts. "We are every bit as excited to have them on our team," Rhoads says. "My job is to help that extended family at Ray's build a great relationship with the brand."

Before licensing, Rhoads went over details and expectations with the retailer's staff, and those include a certain volume of sales per month.

Mike Floersch has great expectations of his own. "We want to be the destination store. We're not only bringing in something different, but we're bringing in quality," he says. "People want consistent quality at a decent price, and we can do that."

West Manhattan Ray's meat department manager Darlene Kasten says her staff at the full service counter takes pride in cutting any portion sizes customers want. "That's important when you're trying a premium product, and it's important for people who are not shopping for a big family," she notes. On the other hand, given a little advance notice, Kasten also appreciates the orders such as 150 strip steaks for a cattlemen's dinner.

No matter how much or how little you ring up at the cash register, Floersch says you can expect service all the way to your car. "It's a way we show our customers how much we appreciate them shopping with us," he says.

The array of small-town, high-quality grocery stores set in cattle country with a good many Angus producers has the Floersch family weighing alternatives for all the stores down the road. The prepackaged natural brand is already company-wide. "We're monitoring our CAB sales in this store, and then we'll evaluate our next steps, one day at a time," he says.

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