

# Adding Value to the End Product

North Carolina's Biltmore Estate offers a 'Field to Table Program' where consumers dine on estate-grown beef and other products.

Story & photos by Janet Mayer

If you visited Biltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C., during the past five years and ate at one of the estate's restaurants, chances are good that Biltmore Angus beef might have been a featured entrée on the menu.

"What better way to add value to a product than to serve it on a plate direct to the customer," says Ted Katsigianis, vice president of agriculture. "This is taking it to the ultimate end in terms of retailing."

Prior to selling beef through the restaurants, cattle from the Biltmore Angus herd were sold as commercial and registered seedstock or preconditioned feeder calves,

with a few sold as freezer beef to some of the estate's 1,000 employees.

In addition to the beef herd, the estate also features restaurant specials of pasture veal, lamb or trout seasoned with herbs, accompanied by vegetables, mushrooms and wine, all grown and produced on the estate.

The meats come from herds started at the estate after the Biltmore dairy herd was dispersed following almost 100 years of operation. To manage the hilly pastureland, a herd of registered Angus and Limousin cattle was started in 1983, with a herd of sheep being added in 1998.

The current Biltmore herd has become



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predominately Angus, and numbers have grown to about 250 brood cows. The best bulls are no longer sold as seedstock, but are kept for use at the restaurant. Castrated at birth, the steers are not implanted, but are fed grain while on pasture until they reach 1,100-1,300 pounds (lb.) They are then sent to a nearby facility where they are harvested under U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspection and aged for two weeks before being cut to the specifications of Executive Chef Stephen Adams. The heifers are either kept for replacements or sold as registered and commercial seedstock.

Biltmore visitors enjoy seeing the black cattle grazing the pastures of the rolling hills of the estate, which was built by George Vanderbilt in the 1890s. As many estates of that time, it was patterned after self-sufficient European country estates, growing fruits, vegetables, beef and dairy products to feed the staff, the Vanderbilt family and their frequent guests.

Much of the original 125,000 acres is now part of the National Forest system, but the remaining 8,000 acres and the 250-room residence are owned and operated as a public attraction for profit by Vanderbilt's great-great-grandson, William Cecil.

More than 900,000 guests visit the estate each year, with as many as 2,000 a day eating at the estate's restaurants. It became apparent to Cecil and others from the management team that the restaurants could afford them the opportunity to continue the tradition of self-sufficiency by serving estate-grown products to their customers.

"We all realize on the farm level, especially small farmers, that you can't live by commodity prices," Katsigianis says. "You have to add value to your product, whether you are doing it by marketing through CAB® (Certified Angus Beef®) or selling freezer beef direct to consumers or taking it all the way to the restaurant as we do. CAB is a great example of a value-added product; in fact, I would say it is *the example* in the meat industry. If you don't add some value to your product, you aren't going to make it in this business."

The "Field to Table Program" was begun at Biltmore about five years ago when beef was put on the menus. Working toward implementing more products into their restaurants, the operation expanded to include a herd of sheep, a 10-acre vegetable garden, mushroom production and aquaculture. Two years later, a line of Biltmore privately labeled products, including sauces, dressings and jams, also became part of the program.

"It is a very successful program."

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Katsigianis says. “Our chefs love it, our customers love it, and the product is good, especially the beef, which is all 100% Angus.”

Although Katsigianis says he knows that other breeders do not have the advantage of marketing through an outlet like Biltmore, he says it would be great if everyone could experience what he has by selling directly to a consumer.

“You worry about the feedback that you are going to get, and I think everyone should do this sometime,” he says. “All of a sudden you realize, we have close to a million people coming through here eating Biltmore beef and Biltmore lamb, and my signature is on every plate. It is scary!”

“In the industry, we always have the discussion that the cow-calf people are not talking to the packer and everybody in between is doing his own thing. Well, when you become totally vertically integrated, and your biggest customer is the Biltmore gourmet chef, you kind of change things a bit,” he says with a laugh. “You start looking at things a little differently, and I think this type of experience goes a long way in making us better producers.”



## The chef's view

The special of the day at the Biltmore Estate Bistro was an appetizer of brochette of estate-raised tenderloin of beef with Gorgonzola pudding followed by an entrée of estate-raised New York strip steak crusted with black peppercorns and accompanied by asparagus, carrots, squash, sweet potatoes, cranberry fritters and a glass of Biltmore Estate merlot — a delight to the eye, as well as to the palate of any beef lover.



► Biltmore Estate Executive Chef Stephen Adams displays the special of the day, a New York strip.

“We get a lot of feedback from customers,” says Executive Chef Stephen Adams. “It seems like people are really focused on fresh products today, and I know that they like the fact that much of the meat and vegetables are grown right here.”

“We try to plan our menus around what is available in produce as well as the meats, and we have a great crew of qualified chefs who participate in implementing the use of the entire carcasses of beef, veal and lamb. We constantly change the menus in all four restaurants, usually four times a year, with the seasons.”

“It has been a good experience for me, working with the estate meats, as I find the cuts to be more consistent and a better color than the boxed meats. Overall, it is just a better product and a lot more tender than other beef we can buy.”