

Cultivated Curiosity



Matsushima's "good things" a lasting legacy for cattle feeding.

by Abbie Burnett, Certified Angus Beef LLC

"Learn the good things, forget the bad things." That's 99-year-old John Matsushima's advice for living a good life.

You can see it in his face, too.

The wrinkles permanently creased are born not of age, but a century of laughter and remembering the good times.

Japanese-American heritage did not always make life easy, but you won't often hear him talk about it. Instead he focuses on the people he's worked with — colleagues, peers and graduate students — as the secret to his success. This year's Feeding Quality Forum Industry Achievement Award is one of his many accolades in the last decade. What he's provided to the industry is incalculable; the influence on lives, immeasurable.

It started when curiosity piqued at his father purchasing 10 heifers and one bull at the Denver Union Stockyards: "I always thought, how can cattle eat green grass and then produce red meat?"

The boy enrolled in 4-H and FFA, and soon won a cattle feeding contest. Two subsequent scholarships paid his way to Colorado State University (Colorado A&M at the time) to receive his bachelor's and master's degrees.

While conducting research for his doctorate at the University of Nebraska, Matsushima caught the

attention of the Monfort family when he thought up one of the biggest contributions to the feeding industry to date: the steam corn flaker.

"We were having breakfast one morning, and instead of bacon and eggs, we were having cereal," he recalls. "And it came to my mind, maybe what we ought to do is feed cattle a warm breakfast."

Matsushima knew how unique cattle were.

"You're usually feeding the bacteria instead of the animal."

Changing the starch composition through steam flaking and then pressing the corn makes easier access for rumen bacteria.

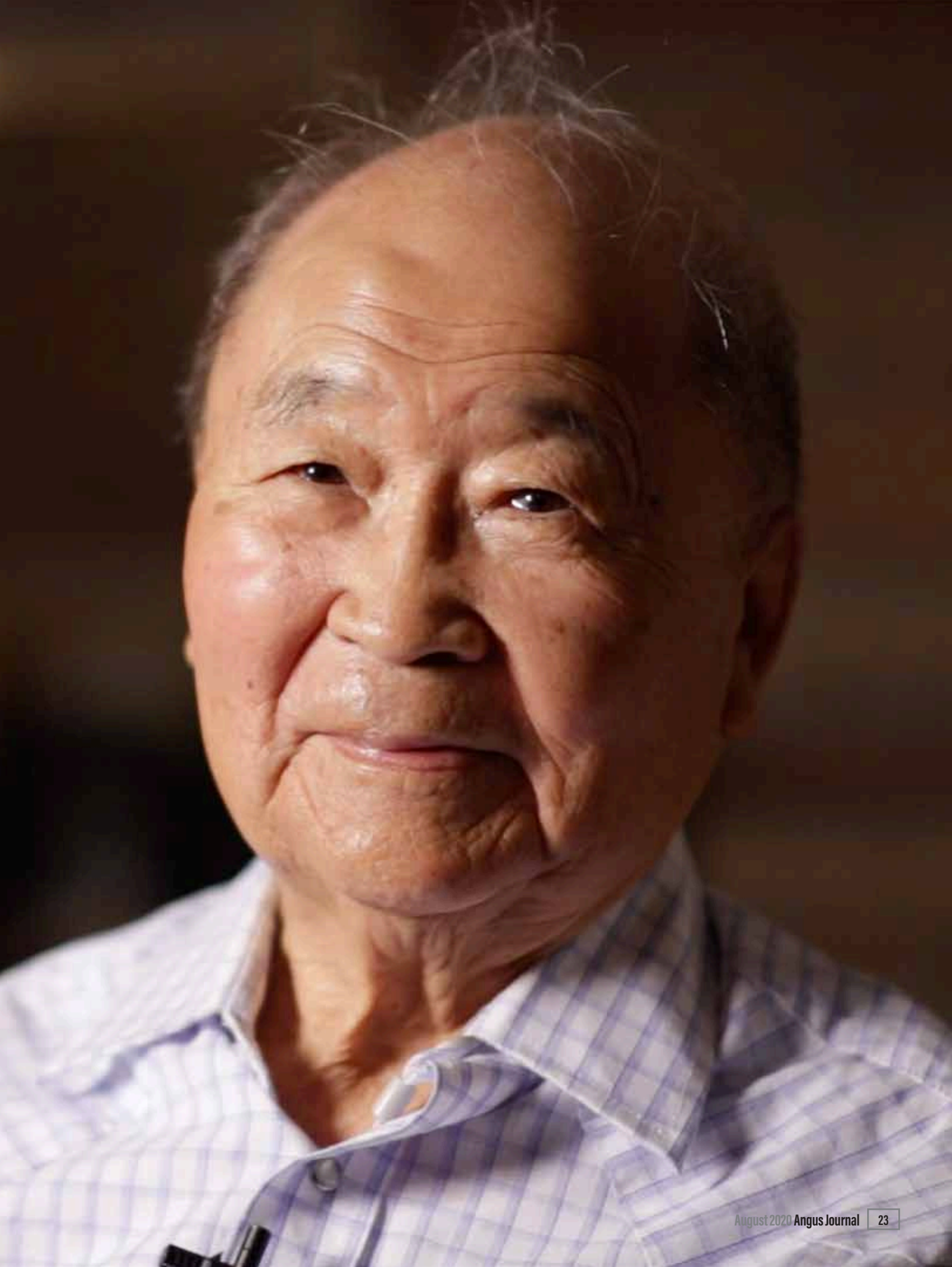
That revolution lowered costs for the feeder, and in turn, the beef consumer.

"By improving the feed efficiency, you can trace this back to the economy," Matsushima says. "So today the consumer can buy their beef almost 10% cheaper than before."

Steam flaking was the tip of the iceberg for Matsushima. Monfort and other early feeding greats convinced him to move back to Colorado State, where he taught and researched even more.

When he noticed scours tormenting young calves, he tried antibiotics, which practically eliminated the problem. What's even better, he followed those calves

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through to the packing plant and discovered they had no abscessed livers.

Matsushima made everything better for feedyard cattle, from curtailing foot rot with extended concrete aprons at bunks to creating a baked “feed grade” urea, and incorporating higher roughage to grain rations.

When cattle feeding started, the consensus called for very long periods on feed to utilize surplus grain. As Matsushima discovered, this added surplus fat to beef carcasses. So the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) Fed Beef Contest was born.

“After the animals were slaughtered, we took the carcasses and put them in a showcase,” Matsushima says. “And that really surprised the

people who came to visit the stock show.”

He remained superintendent of the contest for 20 years, just one of many steps the scientist took to improve beef quality in the feeding industry.

With great work done in the States, he also made quite the impression globally.

Matsushima helped develop the first feedyard in Africa and consulted in countries like Germany, Australia and China. But perhaps his biggest international acclaim was in Japan.

What started as an invitation to speak at a conference in Tokyo blossomed into a warm relationship.

Matsushima knew Japan cut their carcasses between the 5th and 6th rib, where marbling started from the front, so he provided a little bit of advice.

“I told them, ‘Well, if you buy carcasses from the U.S., you would be paying for the carcasses on the basis of the 12th and 13th rib, so when they get to Japan, you would find that U.S. Choice carcasses would probably grade a little higher.’ That would be a profit for the Japanese distributors.”

That opened their eyes.

Today beef exports to Japan average more than \$2 billion a year. For his efforts over time, the U.S. scientist received the Japanese Emperor award in 2009 at its highest level, the Emperor Citation.

While these accomplishments and their industry effects are vast, Matsushima is more proud of his work as a professor, particularly when it comes to his students.

“They would always ask curious questions,” he says. “They helped me a great deal. That was one of the research highlights of my career, in teaching.”

One student asked when a steer will quit gaining 2.5 pounds (lb.) a day. Matsushima didn’t know — so they found out.

In all, he fostered discovery in more than 10,000 students and 55 graduate students, the latter helping



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A life well-lived by any standard.

to conduct the NWSS Fed Beef Contest and participating in his research projects.

One of those graduate students was longtime Elanco ruminant nutritionist Scott Laudert, who recalls Matsushima's work ethic.

"He was always early to get into the office. When I was a grad student, he would be out at the feedyard early in the morning," Laudert says. "It wasn't uncommon for him to be out there at 4:30 or 5 o'clock. He would read the bunks and do the paperwork for the cattle feeders to make their morning and afternoon feeds."

Since Matsushima taught him how to read bunks, he had to meet him at the feedyard about five o'clock every morning — daylight or darkness, rain or shine.

"He was just an exceptional teacher in that he'd take someone under his wing and teach them all they needed to know," Laudert says. "And if they were able to perform, he's just let them take off on their own."

Matsushima would encourage the same bond among his graduate students that he developed individually.

"He's always tried to bring us together, to gather his former students at scientific meetings and whatnot," Laudert says. "I know that I and many, many of his graduate students very much appreciate everything that he's done for us. He's well-deserving of this award."

Matsushima doesn't see these awards as recognition for himself, but of the people around him.



Matsushima was always finding ways to give back to the industry, serving as the superintendent of the National Western Stock Show fed beef contest for 20 years.

"You know, people don't receive credit for what they've done themselves," he says. "They've had other people help them, and that's true with me. There were good friends and good family — they all supported me. And there's been a number of good livestock leaders, good teachers, good students. They all helped me."

That support team included his late wife, Dorothy, two children Bob and Nancy, and four grandchildren.

"What I'm most proud of," says Matsushima, "is my family. And I'm proud I'm an American citizen."

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Editor's note: Matsushima will be recognized at the 2020 Feeding Quality Forum, which has moved on-line this year. For more information, visit www.feedingqualityforum.com.