

Scientist Behind the Sizzle

'Dr. Bob' played key role in the development of the Certified Angus Beef® brand.

by Eileen Keller

Known simply as "Dr. Bob," the scientific mastermind behind the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand has retired as a consultant. For his service and dedication, he was recognized at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) annual conference in Cleveland, Ohio, Aug. 21-23.

Although Bobby VanStavern's meat science expertise was essential to the creation of the brand and its heralded standards, his character and entrepreneurial spirit were just as important. All were instrumental in shaping the brand during the last 25 years.

His favorite saying: "Never say it can't be done."

His creed, in a word: Quality.

Tapped in 1978 to create the CAB brand's specifications, he quickly became a key to the development of the program. He started by teaching the staff and each new licensee what those

specifications meant in creating a consistent, first-rate product. The company still uses the "Science Behind the Sizzle" seminar he coined.

"At that time, there were so many meat scientists interested in seeing the grade standards lowered," explains Mick Colvin, the first CAB executive director. "Dr. Bob was already a stalwart for quality, but he had a lot more data and science behind his justification than I did — common sense backed by data."

Caring for the brand

For years, VanStavern was a regular at CAB seminars, drawing an audience on, and off, the podium. "Dr. Bob would take all the scientific findings and translate them into lay terms for us, so we could go back to the customer and explain," says Charlie Robinson, president of Oxford Trading Co., a Massachusetts CAB retail distributor.

A sounding board for licensees, VanStavern would ferret out the particulars so informed decisions could be made. Robinson says, "He has been an inspiration and motivator for the brand who took time to work on our problems — the primary counselor who rallied everyone with his speeches."

"He usually answered a question with a

question, and he was very interested to learn about your business so he could help," says Mark Polzer, now CAB foodservice director and former Becker Foods employee. "He can take his tremendous meat science understanding and lay it on top of real business plans to see what works for you."

Nancy Burns, owner of Dole & Bailey Inc., a foodservice distributor near Boston, Mass., remembers, "Twenty-five years ago we were all just a ragtag bunch of meat guys with a lot of things in common. We all had a passion that was on fire and could not be quenched. Dr. Bob saw this in us.

"He provided careful, well-thought-out planning when we were too tired to think," she adds. "He was always providing solutions when we thought it was over. He became our greatest cheerleader. He believed in us."

"My first introduction to the CAB brand was a presentation Dr. Bob made to a large group of meat scientists," says Jim Riemann, CAB president and noted meat scientist. "He explained the CAB standards and the resulting product. Most scientists from all over the country were challenging him, but it was obvious he was totally committed and believed this was exactly what consumers wanted. Twenty-five years of experience proved he was exactly right."

Setting standards

These days, few would challenge the specifications Dr. Bob set for the brand. They have not changed in 25 years and are still considered the hallmarks of great beef. (See "CAB at 25" on page 98.)

The standards worked "because they are correct," VanStavern says.

"Over the years, he has maintained his focus with a no-nonsense commitment to quality. The brand might not have succeeded at the beginning without him. He didn't mince words if he was concerned about the direction of CAB," Colvin says. "I can remember him saying, 'If it was easy, Colvin, someone would have done it a long time ago.'"

Polzer says, "When it comes to the



"Never say it can't be done."

— Bobby "Dr. Bob" VanStavern

specifications that eliminate large numbers of cattle, it takes devotion to set them and stay with them. From time to time, we hear we should change our specifications, but we have never wavered."

Less than 8% percent of U.S. beef can earn the brand's name; among Angus-type cattle, less than 18% qualify. "I think for the beef industry, as a whole, it's been a very positive thing ... beef is just better," VanStavern says.

"Even though he has retired from the academic community, he continues to stay up-to-date with the industry, and his counsel continues to be very solid," Riemann says. "He has helped develop the blueprint we'll use as we continue to work on making 'destination products' for consumers and the trade."

VanStavern says he especially enjoyed his work with the brand. "At Ohio State, my job was to work with all phases of the meat industry — beef, pork and poultry — producers, packers, even some consumer education. It (CAB) was the first time in my experience that the total industry came together to produce a product. We had the team concept, and the consumer is the winner.

"But all this is possible because of people, not because somebody sat down and had a good idea," he insists. "People believed and tried to make it happen."

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Editor's Note: VanStavern earned a doctorate in animal science from Ohio State University (OSU) and bachelor's and master's degrees from West Virginia University (WVU). He taught and conducted meat research at OSU and became a meats specialist for the OSU Cooperative Extension Service. He officially retired Sept. 30, 2003.

