

Old World Artisans



PHOTOS BY MARK MCCULLY

At the end of the day, quality counts.

by Rachel Stuart & Miranda Reiman

Tradition matters to a Kansas cattle rancher who works the same piece of land as three previous generations. It applies to a Nebraska feeder who followed in his father's footsteps to produce consistent results for his customer time and time again.

New York City's DeBragga and Spitzer, a *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand licensed specialty-meat company, has its own rich beef-industry traditions, grounded in a commitment to excellence.

In the 1920s, beef carcasses were brought in by rail and taken to small, specialized butcher shops. The meat was cut to order, dry-aged, and all details were crafted by hand. This old world artistry is still the hallmark of DeBragga and Spitzer's customer service, and it's how current owners, Marc John Sarrazin and George Faison, keep the business

relevant in today's market, where broadline distributors create stiff competition.

Surveying the black-and-white meat district pictures lining their lobby walls,

Sarrazin says, "We try to have one foot planted firmly in our traditions and our past, and one foot planted firmly in technology and where we're going. It's about maintaining balance, which is not always easy."

That philosophy was handed down from his father, a trained butcher and

a Frenchman with a passion for good food. Perhaps Marc Sarrazin Sr. learned that from his mother, who owned a café in the "old country."

When the immigrant started with DeBragga and Spitzer in 1954, he was a butcher, but by 1973 he'd worked his way up to president and bought part ownership in the business. Less than a decade later, he was

"We have seen an incredible jump and awareness in naturally raised products across the board."

— Marc John Sarrazin

making one of his most important business decisions.

Partnering with the brand

"The best thing that happened to our company at the time was *Certified Angus Beef*," Sarrazin says. DeBragga and Spitzer was one of the first distributors that Mick Colvin, the brand's founding executive, targeted because of its big city location and reputation for selling upscale accounts.

"My father was very excited about the prospect because quality beef was hard to come by; it was very inconsistent," says Sarrazin, who took over as president when his father retired in 1992.

When the product arrived for testing, he admits it looked like any top-Choice beef.

"I can't tell you that they were wowed at the 'visual look,' but then they ate it and said, 'Yeah, wow, this is really — no — really, really good,'" he remembers. "The key factor as to why we went onboard and why it was great for us is that it's a great product."

They signed on with CAB in 1982 and have been selling it ever since, adding both the CAB Natural and Prime extensions to their offerings as they became available this decade.

"Newer generations of chefs are looking for more natural, but they still want natural beef that tastes good and has great marbling

► **Above:** Marc John Sarrazin and George Faison use customer service to keep DeBragga and Spitzer relevant in today's market, where broadline distributors create stiff competition.



► The company's dry-aging rooms house more than half a million dollars in inventory.

and flavor," Sarrazin says. "That's where CAB Natural comes in. It's been great for us."

Five years ago that category made up 3%-5% of their sales. Today that number is closer to 30%.

"We have seen an incredible jump and awareness in naturally raised products across the board," he says.

Hallmark of service

Overall, CAB easily makes up the largest part of their beef sales. It doesn't take long for them to sell customers on the value of the brand, but they're not the only licensee in the market, so DeBragga and Spitler uses service to set itself apart.

"It's our strength," Sarrazin says. "We won't survive competing on price with large companies dealing in high volume and low margins. That's not our game. We have to be high-quality and unique."

"We don't take shortcuts; we age the meat the right way," he says. "Those are things that will help us continue to prosper."

The company's dry-aging rooms, the largest in New York City, house more than half a million dollars in inventory.

"To get the true dry-aged flavor profile our customers want, we have to put at least three to four weeks on it," he says. "You can't rush this process, and you can't dry-age a product without marbling."

Sarrazin personally commits to that level of quality every time, and that's why he retains customers such as Le Cirque, Waldorf=Astoria, Craftsteak and Restaurant Daniel.

He has also kept up business relationships his father started in Bermuda, where CAB is shipped to high-end restaurants and resorts. Servicing that market in the early years helped pave the way for other licensed exporters, who now sell to thousands of international restaurants and retailers.

Business is good but, as in cattle production, there are perennial challenges.

"I have three children, three college tuitions to pay," Sarrazin says. "The economy, bad credit and wondering if I'm going to get paid for the product I'm selling keep me up at night."

"Am I going to be able to survive in a world of convenience and a fast-food approach versus the way I believe the product should be handled? I think about it every day," he says.

But the combination of the CAB brand with his old-world style gives Sarrazin confidence as he looks forward.

"At the end of the day, you have to have a great product and handle it right," he says.

