

# The Tour That Tied It All Together

Story & photos by **Laura Nelson**

**R**ally Farms in Millbrook, N.Y., kicked off summer by hosting more than 200 chefs, butchers and sales professionals from the nearby big cities. Rotating through over three days, the visitors learned about the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand — from how the cattle are raised to the science-based specifications to cutting and merchandising beef so as to drive sales.

Owners Jesse and Gayle Bontecou and herdsman Allan Lawyer answered questions about how their cattle are cared for, bred, managed and fed. They highlighted environmental stewardship and also dialed down to the specifics of selecting and raising quality-focused Angus cattle.

“You have to hope they realize it’s not just an accident — you don’t just breed a cow to a cow and come out with a hamburger,” Gayle says. “It is indeed a science, and a very, very long, drawn-out, specific one. It is an artful

science that produces the best quality. If they can relate to ShopRite, that means they are going to have a consistent quality piece of meat, that’s going to help us sell the bull to the guy whose cows will produce that meat.”

A decade ago, Cattle-Fax research showed that every million pounds of CAB product sales contributed about a dollar to average registered Angus bull prices. That premium, more than \$500, is the result of consumer demand — something the Bontecous hope can be further driven by groups such as those they hosted, who are now educated and enthusiastic about the brand.

## On the farm

The Rally Farms folks and American Angus Association regional manager David Mullins chauffeured 10 flatbed trailer-loads of spectators through pastures over the three days. They answered questions of their guests,

with hopes that information would reach a larger audience, Jesse says.

“Some of these people are standing by the meatcase on a daily basis,” he says. “Those are the people we want to reach, to tell their customers a little bit about how they came to the farm and how great it was. Then consumers start to realize there is something besides just a piece of meat in the case.”

Perhaps those consumers will spread the word, too, he adds.

“It’s a tough sell for us in the beef industry, because people in America have no idea where their food comes from,” Jesse says. “It’s not easy to educate people about what we do here, but if the folks who came here can get enthusiastic about selling beef, that’s a real start. ’Cause I tell you, when the price of beef goes up, the price of purebred cattle goes up, too.”

## Behind the counter

Meat cutters, buyers, merchandisers and ShopRite management didn’t just get a glimpse of life on the farm. The grocery chain employees watched the breakdown of subprimal cuts and heard discussions on carcass utilization and merchandising. Those are valuable lessons when there are more “meatcutters” than old-time butchers in the retail business, explains ShopRite meat supervisor Peter Piacquadio.

“I’ve been in the business all my life. My mom and dad had a butcher shop when they came to America in ’67; before that, we had a butcher shop in Italy,” he says. “I’m a butcher — a butcher can take a cow and break it down piece by piece. I know exactly what cuts come from where and how they get there.”

By contrast, he says, the typical meat cutter today simply opens boxes of primal and cuts them. “They don’t always know all the things they can do with each piece of meat. What they learned [at Rally Farms] is really how to merchandise it. That’s how you make money in this business,” he adds.

“This gives our meat guys more expertise when talking to their customers,” Piacquadio says. “Next time, they’ll know they can give their customers three different pieces of meat out of the same cut, and that comes at three different prices.”

## Making the sale

Marc John Sarrazin, owner of New York City’s DeBragga and Spitler specialty meat company, is no stranger to the brand. More than 30 years ago his father led the company in becoming CAB’s first licensed foodservice distributor. But Sarrazin Jr. knows longevity isn’t an excuse for complacency. He brought members of his sales staff and foodservice clientele to Rally Farms to “indoctrinate them to the culture.”



► Rally Farms owners Jesse and Gayle Bontecou (pictured after receiving a clock from CAB’s Kara Wilson at Rally Farms) and herdsman Allan Lawyer answered questions about how their cattle are cared for, bred, managed and fed.



► **Above:** Chef guests participated in workshops that explained the difference between wet and dry aging.

► **Right:** The end result of a cutting demo at Rally Farms.



► ShopRite meat department employees.



► Visitors to Rally Farms with CAB's Brian Donelan.



► **Above:** Sysco Boston guests study EPDs.

► **Left:** American Angus Association Regional Manager David Mullins explains beef management and production to tour guests.

“We tell our team: You have to sell, you have to sell. When they see this side of the story, it helps them do that. It helps them make the sale when they can visualize where it all begins.

“Coming out to a farm like this re-emphasizes to me, as an owner, how great the brand is and how important it is to my business. I bring my existing clients out here and they say, ‘Wow! I’m a part of this!’ I bring non-consumers out here and they say, ‘Wow! I’ve got to be a part of this!’”

That enthusiastic word of mouth among culinary leaders is the best sales tool Sarrazin’s team has.

“These guys will go back to their restaurants inspired. It will show up in their cooking; it will show up in their attitudes. I don’t know if coming to a farm tour like this helps them actually sell a steak any better; the CAB steak sells itself. But it does give them a greater belief in the product,” he says.

“If you believe in the product, you automatically sell it better because you love it more. These chefs, these restaurant owners, my sales team — they have invested a passion in this product, and that’s huge. You can’t help but be inspired when you come to a place like this.”



► Sysco’s Fred Casinelli with his staff.

