

Reconnecting

Chef Victor Matthews explains the power of beef.

by Eric Grant

Somewhere, at some time, something went wrong with beef production. The lines of communication between those who produced the product with those who consumed it became blurred. The connection between ranches and restaurants broke down.

So Victor Matthews, one of a handful of elite, five-star chefs in America, set out several years ago to find out why.

In doing so, he's become a force for change that's revolutionizing the way beef is produced, processed and distributed, and re-establishing age-old ties that shouldn't have disappeared in the first place.

Chef Victor, as he's known, doesn't fit the traditional stereotype of a snooty chef in the kitchen. At 38, he's high on energy, bursting with creativity and new ideas. He plays in a rock band, drives fast cars and owns the historic Black Bear Restaurant, one of Colorado's few four-star dining establishments, near Colorado Springs.

His culinary adventures have earned him dozens of medals and awards, and he's represented the United States around the world, teaching chefs about American cuisine.

But some things about him are more

traditional. He yearns for a return to a simpler time, when people were closer to the land, and farmers were closer to their markets.

"Back in the old days, the chefs knew everybody," Matthews says. "They knew the people who raised the chickens, the cattle, the zucchini. But somewhere that got lost. It got watered down. Most chefs today simply pick up the phone and call their distributor. That's the extent of their contact with beef production."

After he opened the Black Bear in 1999, Matthews became keenly aware of a pronounced shift in customer demands. They didn't just want a fine-dining experience; they wanted the story behind their entrée. They wanted to know where it came from. They wanted to know who produced it. They wanted to know the breeding and the process that went into it, and they wanted to know why some products had better quality than others.

Then came the revelation: "I'm not selling beef," he says. "I'm selling trust."

So Matthews started asking questions. He worked his way up the production chain, meeting with producers and distributors. He toured ranches and feedlots. He investigated genetics and new ways of processing beef.

He also conducted a comprehensive taste test, preparing steaks from many different sources, breeds and production systems — everything from high-marbling Wagyu to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Select — and had more than 200 people evaluate the steaks based on their overall flavor, eating quality and price-value relationships.

"We discovered a major problem," Matthews recalls. "There was no communication between producers and the people selling the meat. Our customers give us a lot of feedback at the restaurant. And if you're good at running a restaurant, you adapt

your products and services to what you're being told. But with beef, there was no reliable way for me to make these adjustments in my products because the lines of communication between me and beef producers were nonexistent."

Changing consumer preferences

Based on what he's learned, Matthews now sees clearly the evolution of consumer preferences during the last half century, and he understands why there's a disconnect. At one time they simply wanted to know the "cut" of the steaks they were buying. Then they wanted to know about "cut" and "grade."

Matthews also credits the emergence of *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) and the long list of other Angus products as one of the great success stories for the beef business. And because of CAB's success, consumers now combine cut, grade and breed as key determiners in their purchasing decisions.

"People with Angus have to be commended for putting together the biggest run on branding in history," he says. "It's Angus, Angus, Angus, and there's a reason for that."

Matthews now believes consumers want more than just breed and quality; they're demanding information about how the product was produced. In other words, information has become a determiner of a quality eating experience — and the more information people like Matthews have, the more value they can add to beef.

"The average person in America learns 'X' amount of information about beef, and then they apply it in a very simplistic way," he says. "They're kind of uneasy. They feel that if they get something natural or organic, they'll be safer. Maybe they're right. Maybe they're wrong. But that's how they feel, and that's how they're making buying decisions these days.

"If I put two steaks side by side, and one says New York Strip and one says

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Angus, they'll buy the Angus," Matthews explains. "But if I put that Angus steak next to a steak that says Organic Angus, they'll flock to the organic product."

Understanding value and price

Matthews explains that there are two different approaches to pricing items on a restaurant's menu: front to back and back to front. In a front-to-back situation, the menu is what determines the price. Understanding the difference — and why more restaurateurs are embracing "back to front" — will be key for producers delivering higher-quality products to consumers.

In the traditional front-to-back approach, "if I've determined that I need to have a \$16 filet mignon on my menu, then I know how much I can spend on it when I buy it from my supplier," Matthews says. "Once I do that, I go back and plug in the numbers, and because my approach is based on price sensitivity, I end up going to a Sysco to deliver to me a product at a certain price."

Back to front is where the chef decides that he wants to serve a specific item, and sets the price accordingly. "I want a piece of nice Prime ribeye. I want to stuff it with morel mushrooms. I want baby zucchini, etc.," he says. "The better chefs are always working back to front. They envision what they want their cuisine to be, and they make it happen. Price becomes secondary to quality."

Trouble is, it can be difficult securing the right kind of product to attain the chef's vision. So Matthews has adopted a more flexible approach to developing his menu items that balances supply of meat products between very small producers with limited, seasonal supply with products from big-time restaurant-supply companies like Sysco.

In other words, every day the menu at Black Bear is different, and every menu item is determined by its availability and its seasonality. He calls it a "flex menu."

"The bottom line is that the amount of information our customers require has grown exponentially," Matthews says. "It's been a landslide increase. And for this reason, I'm fully supportive of animal ID and country-of-origin labeling. The reason is that the customers themselves are asking questions about beef, and if I don't

answer them, guess what, they don't want it. Information satisfies my customers."

Interestingly, Matthews' flexible approach to determining menu items and suppliers also helps to attract and keep customers with different philosophies on how beef should be produced. For instance, some prefer steaks produced by local farmers. Others prefer food produced by corporate conglomerates.

"Some people think the food-safety specifications of these big companies must be mind-boggling, and that they have to protect themselves so their products are safer," Matthews says. "Other people believe in buying products from small producers. They trust the individual. It's like they can look you eye to eye."

Several years ago, Matthews himself became a cattle producer. Working with Mike Callicrate, a Colorado Springs-based rancher, they developed a herd of cattle to provide a high-quality eating experience for restaurant customers.

The cattle they developed — dubbed "American Extreme" — are half Angus and half Wagyu. They represent the culmination of everything Matthews has learned in recent years about beef, beef production and customer preferences. The Wagyu genetics were provided by sires related to the famed Japanese bull, Fukutsu, internationally acclaimed for producing extremely high levels of marbling.

Most of the American Extreme carcasses possess more than double the amount of marbling needed to qualify for Prime.

Cattle produced through the system are grown "all naturally," slowly and patiently, and are finished at a Kansas feedyard. They're harvested at a packing plant in Colorado Springs, where the carcasses are processed using a new technology called "Rinse and Chill."

The process, he says, improves tenderness, appearance and safety of beef. Known also as vascular flushing, it cleans carcasses with a water-based solution to lower pH in the muscle tissue. This also reduces bacterial contamination and cholesterol while increasing the meat's shelf life.

Immediately after the animal is stunned, a cold solution of water, sugar and salt is injected into the arterial system. The solution replaces arterial blood as

it circulates throughout the carcass. By lowering muscle tissue pH, the solution keeps the meat a desirable red color. The acidity that develops in the carcass also helps to tenderize the meat.

The beef is then dry-aged for 21 to 27 days, and prepared for Black Bear customers along with a full complement of other beef products.

"The beef is really the culmination of everything we've learned," Matthews says.

Future effects

Matthews not only is affecting the way beef is produced, he's also influencing other chefs from around the world.

To share his knowledge with others, Matthews recently opened up the Paragon Culinary School of Colorado Springs, where he provides hands-on training to other chefs.

It's an elite group of students. Most have 18 to 25 years of experience in the field. The hands-on course work takes three years to complete. Students get exposed to the best techniques, best ideas and the best minds in the business.

"Many of our instructors have run five-star facilities, so when you have multiple instructors with five-star backgrounds who are providing you with hands-on training, it's a really big deal," Matthews says. "No one graduates from here if they don't know what they're doing. This is all about hands-on training with the best of the best. We believe you've got to taste it, smell it, to know what you're doing. Everyone gets highly educated here."

An education at Paragon also stresses the importance of knowing as much as you can about the food you're preparing for your customers.

"The Number 1 thing I emphasize is the importance of sourcing," he says. "As a chef, you have to find someone you can trust to provide you with the products you need. If you're a lawyer, you don't have time to understand everything there is to know about beef. If you have a problem with your roof, you call a roof guy. If you have a problem with your plumbing, you call a plumber. Chefs are specialists in beef. They need to know everything they can about the product, so when a customer has questions, you've got answers."

