

# A Whole New Perspective

A visit to retailer Whole Foods prompts renewed purpose for these Angus producers.

by *Kindra Gordon*

**O**ne perk of raising cattle is the homegrown beef that producers and their families have in steady supply for their dinner tables. But, as a result, most beef producers aren't familiar with how beef and other meats are presented to consumers and sold at the grocery store.

To that end, this summer the American Angus Association hosted its first ever Beef Leaders Institute (BLI), with the purpose of educating young Angus breeders about the entire production system — from feedlots and packing plants to wholesale and retail distributors.

Many of the 19 BLI producer participants got an eye-opening experience during their visit to the Whole Foods Market retail store in Kansas City. Whole Foods — which was founded in 1980 and today has stores throughout North America and the United Kingdom — bills itself as an upscale retailer specializing in natural and organic foods.

## Surprises in store

For T.J. Curtin, Blue Mound, Ill., and Kenny Hinkle, Nevada, Mo., this was their first visit to Whole Foods. Hinkle says what surprised him most were the number of people shopping in the store and the prices they were willing to pay for items.

“It showed that people are willing to pay a huge premium for food items that they perceive as healthier and more safe than items from a regular supermarket,” Hinkle says.

Curtin says another surprise was Whole Foods' positioning of bison as a superior meat to beef.

Cheremie Viator, Franklin, Texas, was also concerned by this effort. She reports that a Whole Foods sticker placed on a package of beef steaks stated: “Buffalo meat has three times the iron of chicken and two times the iron of beef.”

In visiting with a Whole Foods marketing manager, Viator adds, “I was shocked at the strength of their push to market buffalo meat as a protein alternative to beef and the staff's passion about their beliefs of the supposed higher nutritive value of buffalo.”

Another shock came when the marketing

manager mentioned that Whole Foods has classroom initiatives in place in California to educate students about a vegetarian lifestyle.

Viator says she was also surprised that the Whole Foods marketing manager in Kansas City had never been to a farm or ranch, but had strong beliefs about how beef producers should manage their production practices.

Viator, Curtin and Hinkle say a better understanding of the beef industry would result if retailers took the time to visit real producers. Viator is so passionate about this that while at the store she extended an invitation for the marketing manager and any other Whole Foods employee to contact any of the BLI participants for a tour of their ranches.

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— *T.J. Curtin*

## Education essential

From their experiences at the store, each Angus breeder says they came away understanding the continuing need to educate consumers about the beef industry.

“Beef producers must do everything in our power to make sure our product is safe and healthy for every person who enjoys consuming it,” Hinkle says. “As an industry, I think we do a good job of that, but we need to continue emphasizing this and also educate consumers on the safety, nutrition and quality of American beef.”

He adds, “Most American consumers only hear about the beef recalls or the abused animals that are on the evening news. . . . We have to continue to speak out as an industry on the safety of our beef product.”

Likewise, Curtin says, “There is a lot of misinformation out there about beef and conventional beef production. We as producers need to educate people — especially women who do most of the family shopping — about our product before they get misleading information about beef.”

Curtin says even starting at the local level with school children, friends and neighbors



PHOTO COURTESY AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION

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► **Right:** One surprise was Whole Foods' positioning of bison as a superior meat to beef.

is important because they can help spread facts about beef. "We need to tell our family farms' story," he concludes.

This was Viator's third visit to a Whole Foods store.

"Each time has been a real eye-opening experience," she says. "But this time, instead of leaving mad, I left motivated and with a mission."

After her Whole Foods visit on the BLI tour, Viator says she went home and did research on the Internet about the retailer's programs, beliefs and structure. She also studied groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and The Animal Compassion Foundation.

"In my research I found that NCBA's Producer Code for Cattle Care had several positive similarities to those that Whole Foods requests of their beef producers," Viator says. "The basics are the same — care for our animals and stewardship of our land. Where we differ is how many of these standards are implemented."

Of this she says, "As we in agriculture face a shrinking agricultural voting constituency, we will have to seek to offer compromise and education about our practices."

Viator says education of youth about agriculture, and specifically the beef industry, is essential. This motivated her presentation at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) Advisor Meeting.

"In this presentation I asked advisors to accept the mission to teach junior Angus members about the challenges we face with groups such as the Whole Foods customer base," she explains. "I believe we must educate and motivate our younger generation for our industry to survive."

Viator acknowledges that the beef industry does face some challenges.

"We should not turn face to these problems," she says. "But 99% of our producers operate with the goal in mind of leaving their land better for the next generation, and they strive to present a wholesome, safe product for consumers. There is a growing segment in our country that has not heard our story, does not have a strong belief in traditional agriculture, and most importantly, will decide our future. We can no longer be reactive or complacent. Our survival and well-being will depend on every rancher or beef producer making it a mission to get involved and tell our positive story."



PHOTO BY CHERAMIE VIATOR

## More about Whole Foods

With more than 270 stores — and more planned — a Whole Foods Market could eventually be coming to an urban center near you. From the web-site-based, collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia, here is more about Whole Foods Inc.'s environmentally conscious approach to selling food.

- Only sells products that meet its self-imposed quality standards for being "natural," which the store defines as minimally processed foods that are free of hydrogenated fats, artificial flavors, colors, sweeteners and preservatives.
- The company also sells many U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-certified organic foods and products that aim to be environmentally friendly and ecologically responsible.
- After several years of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' (PETA's) petitioning Whole Foods to take steps to ensure the improvement of treatment of animals sold in the stores, Whole Foods created the Animal Compassion Foundation in January 2005, a separate nonprofit organization, to help other producers evolve their practices to raise animals naturally and humanely. As a result of this action, Whole Foods stores do not carry *foie gras* or eggs from hens confined to battery cages due to animal cruelty concerns.
- Because of animal treatment concerns, Whole Foods has also stopped selling live lobsters and crabs in all stores with the exception of Portland, Maine, where that store has demonstrated it is able to meet humane standards. There, the lobsters are kept in private compartments instead of being piled on top of one another in a tank, and employees use a device that gives them a 110-volt shock so that they are not boiled alive in a pot of water. The decision for most Whole Foods stores to not carry live lobsters and crabs has been criticized by some as damaging an important New England tradition and as removing people's connection to where their food actually comes from.
- Whole Foods has announced that it does not intend to sell meat or milk from cloned animals or their offspring, even though the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has ruled them safe to eat.
- In April 2007, Whole Foods Market launched the Whole Trade Guarantee, a purchasing initiative emphasizing ethics and social responsibility concerning products imported from the developing world. The criteria include fair prices for crops, environmentally sound practices, better wages and labor conditions for workers, and premium product quality.
- Most recently on Earth Day, April 22, 2008, Whole Foods Market eliminated the use of disposable plastic grocery bags company-wide. Customers can now choose between paper bags made from 100% recycled paper or from a selection of reusable bags. The campaign is aimed at reducing pollution by eliminating plastic bags and reducing waste by encouraging bag reuse with "bag refunds" of 5¢-10¢, depending on the store.