



Documenting Ag Life

Newest film tells story of beef “from pasture to plate.”

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

In the continuing effort to educate consumers about how their food is produced by farmers and ranchers, video clips and movie documentaries are proving to be a powerful tool to share agriculture’s message.

As examples, the Kansas trio of Peterson Farm brothers Greg, Nathan and Kendal has tapped video technology to create educational and entertaining YouTube videos with ag-related lyrics set to popular music to showcase farm life. Additionally, last year’s *Farmland* documentary featured six young farmers from across the country, sharing each producer’s personal story of the challenges, risks and rewards in raising food for the world.

Now, another documentary — titled *True Beef: From Pasture to Plate* — is showcasing the story of the beef industry through the eyes of high school culinary students.

Chef’s idea

The idea for a film about the beef industry came from Austin, Texas, Chef Mike Erickson, who has done everything from opening restaurants to teaching culinary arts for 12 years at the college and high school level. In Erickson’s most recent role as culinary arts instructor for a vocational program at John B. Connally High School, part of Pflugerville Independent School



District (ISD) in Austin, he wanted his students to understand the origin of beef.

He notes that within the culinary industry, “beef is a big part of what chefs do and a big part of the economy.” Hence, the importance

for culinary students to really understand the production process of beef — and the people involved — to get beef from pasture to plate.

Reflecting on his own training as a chef, he recalls he attended one of the best culinary schools in the country and had a full beef fabrication class, but never once did the students visit a ranch.

It wasn’t until 2013 that Erickson finally was given the opportunity to witness the beef production process. He was invited by the Texas Beef Council to go to Kansas and participate in the Kansas Beef Council Pasture to Plate Tour with a group of 40 chefs, foodservice professionals and other food influencers from nine states.

Erickson says the experience changed his life.

“It showed me how much goes into raising the beef we prepare and serve,” he says. He carried that experience with him, and it was the inspiration for wanting to expose his students to the segments of the beef industry.

His “aha” moment came when he had the idea to take the students to various Texas beef operations — from ranches to packers and retail.

“I want my students to respect the food and the farmers and ranchers who grew it,” he shares.

Erickson had seen the 2008 documentary titled *Pressure Cooker*, which followed a





Philadelphia culinary arts class on the rigors each student faced in succeeding in the program. Thus, he envisioned filming his students' experiences and creating a documentary that could be used as a teaching tool for future classes at his school and, he hoped, at other culinary high school programs in the area and across Texas.

Grant funds were secured for the project through U.S. Foods and the Texas Beef Council, and arrangements were made to have students from the Art Institute of Austin produce the documentary under the direction of professional Austin filmmaker David Barrow. Through the 2013-2014 school year, Erickson and 11 high school culinary students traveled more than 2,200 miles in a yellow school bus to see firsthand what goes into the meat they cook. They visited cattle ranches and farms including tours of feedlots, butcher facilities and packing plants. Ten of the students had never been on a farm or ranch prior to the tour.

Of the 92-minute documentary that resulted, Erickson explains, "The main characters are our kids learning from beef experts."

He adds that the ultimate goal of the project was to help students understand the important role ranchers and farmers have in contributing to culinary and foodservice opportunities.

By the end of the yearlong beef tour, Erickson says of the students, "It changed their lives." He notes that students now have perspective on raising beef cattle. They know which parts of the carcass beef cuts come from. They know about byproducts.

Ultimately, Erickson says, he wanted to open dialogue and create a true story about beef, hence the name of the film, *True Beef*.

He notes that to date, the film *Food Inc.* is often shown in culinary classrooms. In the future, his hope is that *True Beef* will also have the opportunity to be shown in classrooms.

Growing popularity

Since debuting in early 2015, *True Beef* has earned acclaim, including acceptance to be shown at three film festivals, including the South by Southwest EDU Film Festival in Austin. There have been requests to show the film in New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma and California.

This has been a surprise to Erickson, who says, "We never had any ambition of going anywhere other than our state. It was

designed to educate kids in Texas."

Erickson and the Pflugerville ISD, which owns the documentary, have selected an advisory board to develop a plan to make the film available to classrooms across the country in the coming school year.

Erickson believes the film is a positive message about the industry that can provide a new perspective for teachers and their students.

For more about the film, visit www.truebeefthefilm.com.



Editor's Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.

Chef's message to producers

Texas chef Mike Erickson says the beef industry must continue to focus on three pillars — beef safety, beef quality and transparency. Of these, he shares, "Food safety is a must and is nonnegotiable within the food industry. As well, for producers animal welfare is nonnegotiable. We must continue to assure consumers of these things."

Regarding beef quality, Erickson says, "Don't lose sight of eating satisfaction, tenderness and flavor. Limit stress to the animals. Be aware of injection sites for animals. Get BQA (Beef Quality Assurance)-certified."

Additionally, he adds, "Transparency is a must. For many years no one knew what happened in restaurant kitchens, then there was a push to see and know. Farmers and ranchers have been caring for animals and doing things right, but haven't told anyone. Today, you must tell and share your story. Consumers want a relationship."

Erickson suggests cattlemen promote how and where their cattle were raised, become a Master of Beef Advocacy (MBA) graduate and be a digital beef activist. The bottom line is to show and tell consumers what you do — people are interested.

Additionally, Erickson suggests beef producers share more about their legacy.

"It's more than just raising beef," he explains. "Your legacy is family, tradition, lifestyle and keeping that heritage alive."

He continues, "Your lifestyle isn't just about animals. It's about beliefs and values passed down through generations. Ensuring things are left better for those yet to come. It's all about legacy."

On a personal note, Erickson says his daughter shows horses and someday he would like to have his own cattle on their family farm.

"One of the things I love about agriculture is how it's brought my family closer together," he says of his experience. "I'm looking forward to being an FFA dad next year."