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Looking for a Better Steak?

Ever wonder what makes a steak taste so good? The next time you look at a piece of beef, notice the small dots of white fat (the correct term is intra-muscle fat) scattered throughout the meat. This occurrence is called marbling and is measured using a formula—the higher the “marbling score,” the more producers receive for their product.

It naturally follows that producers hope to develop animals with as high a marbling score as possible. There are also other characteristics that are becoming valued – in an increasing health conscious world, there is also a premium paid for beef with a lower fat content.

Another major characteristic in beef is the “rib-eye,” which refers to the amount of muscle in the carcass. The larger the rib-eye, the greater percentage of boneless, closely trimmed cuts that will come off the animal.

It goes without saying that being able to forecast these traits in advance would have tremendous potential to increase the bottom line of producers. With funding help from the Prince Edward Island ADAPT Council (which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund in the province), the Prince Edward Island Bull Performance Centre in Tryon is attempting to do just that.

For the past few years, the centre has been taking ultrasounds of animals for producers to enable them to determine the marbling score and the rib-eye area. Centre spokesman Tim Dixon said in general exotic breeds such as Charolais tend to have larger rib-eye, while the British breed like Angus tend to have more marbling.

A second project has taken the craft of genetic marking to another level. A test has been

developed in western Canada that will show the genetic predisposition of an animal in terms of particular traits such as marbling or rib eye area.

“The ultrasound just shows the state of the animal at a particular point in time,” Dixon said. “This new test shows the animal’s genetic make-up.”

He said the ultrasound test has proven popular, but the new genetic testing may take a while to catch on. One reason, he said is cost. The ultrasound test costs approximately \$16 per animal, while the genetic test runs in the range of \$60.

The uncertain economic climate caused by the prolonged closure of the U.S. border has made some producers wary of any added costs, Dixon said.

He said if feedlots start to pay more for animals who score well in the genetic test, Dixon said that may justify the extra expense for some producers.

The genetic testing performed at the Island centre is part of a region-wide experiment and Dixon said it will be interesting over the long term to compare the results in the three Maritime provinces.

Blueberry Industry Develops Long-Term Strategy

Blueberries have been one of the fastest growing segments of Island agriculture over the past decade. Back in 1994, production hovered at just over two million pounds. By last year, that figure had grown to 8.4 million pounds. To help ensure that growth continues, the P.E.I. Wild Blueberry growers Association commissioned MacPherson, Roche, Smith and Noonan to develop a strategic plan. The P.E.I. ADAPT Council (which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund in the province for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada), provided financial support for the study.

Through a series of meetings and questionnaires, the consultants aimed to get both a snapshot of where the industry currently sits and a road map for the future. Association president John MacDonald said the study involved all stakeholders in the industry— growers, processors and government.

The 100 page study focuses on four major challenges— production, investment, leadership and marketing. It paints a vision of the industry with at least 20,000 in production— half of which would be harvested annually. Last year, there were just over 8,000 acres of blueberries grown and it takes 7-8 years to develop blueberry land to a point where it can support a crop.

As for the current picture of the industry, the consultants noted roughly half of growers have less than 50 acres and earn the bulk of their income outside the blueberry industry. The major players on the production side include four large growers and two co-operatives. On the processing side, there is only one player in the province— Jasper Wyman and Sons— a Maine owned company that has its Island operation in West St. Peters.

The report indicates such a level would allow the province to surpass the yield per acre in Nova

Scotia and New Brunswick. There is a long way to go in that regard— the P.E.I. average yield for the last five years was 2,018 pounds to acre compared to 4,000 pounds per acre in Nova Scotia.

Research conducted by the consultants indicates the price has been more stable in Nova Scotia due to the increased production efficiencies. The report indicates "at a price of approximately 50 cents per pound and an average yield in excess of 3,000 pounds per acre, wild blueberry growers can earn a reasonable return on investment."

The consultants also recommend the association hire a full -time executive director to help develop new markets and better co-ordinate efforts with producer organizations in Atlantic Canada and New England.

"P.E.I. enjoys some natural advantages as a wild blueberry growing area," the study notes. "There is an abundance of reasonably level, virtually rock free land and a moderate climate."

Value Chain Partnerships Key To Success of New Beef Plant

For Dean Baglole, the past three years have been an odyssey that has taught him the value of partnerships. The Freetown beef producer is chair of the producer-owned co-operative that has planned, built and operates the new beef plant in Albany. The P.E.I. ADAPT Council (which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund in the province) has been involved with the province since the beginning, providing financial assistance to carry out a feasibility study on the plant.

Baglole said it was clear right from the beginning Island producers couldn't do it alone— they needed support from the federal and provincial governments, Co-op Atlantic and from their fellow producers in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

The plant is now gearing up towards full production of 400-500 animals per week. The facility handles product for the Atlantic Tender Beef Classic label, which is sold exclusively by Co-op Atlantic. The animals used in the program are grown to a strict protocol, and 80 per cent of animals slaughtered under the program come from P.E.I.

Beef producers in the three provinces began looking at the idea of a new plant after Hub Meat Packers in Moncton (which had been processing product for the program) announced they would now longer handle the product. The producer co-operative began selling hooks in the plant (a producer required a hook for every animal they hoped to send to the plant in a given year) just as the U.S. border closed due to the discovery of mad cow disease in Alberta.

Despite the financial hardships facing the industry, Baglole said producers brought into the plant because they believed having control of production within the region will help insulate the Maritime industry against the world situation somewhat. He pointed out Co-op Atlantic provides the plant with a steady market although there is still room to expand.

"We have given producers an opportunity to have a say in marketing," Baglole said. "If all we do is continue to produce, we are at the bottom of the food chain and there is not a whole lot of hope at the end of the day we are going to get out of the hole the industry now finds itself in." He said producers now have a direct say in how their product is produced, processed and distributed. Baglole added "producers are involved from gate to plate."

Baglole added the federal government has recently committed money for traceability equipment that will make the plant state-of-the-art when it comes to being able to track every animals that comes through the plant along the food chain. He said the Albany facility now has the potential to be a model for the rest of the industry in this field.

Already, he said the system is generating buzz within the processing industry, and the plant has received calls from as far away as Korea inquiring about the technology. Baglole said there is plenty of room for the industry to expand, noting Maritime beef accounts for only a small percentage of beef consumed in the region. He added "there is plenty of room to grow and we are looking forward to the future."

Agri-Tourism Proving To Be a Key to Success

The lush fields of crops that can be seen on any Sunday drive throughout P.E.I. have long served as a scenic backdrop for the tourism industry. Now, efforts are being made to further build the links between agriculture and tourism. At a time when visitors are looking for an "experience" and declining margins are forcing farmers to think outside the box, the move is a natural fit. The P.E.I. ADAPT Council (which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund in the province for Agriculture and Agri- Food Canada), has provided financial support to the newly formed P.E.I. Agri-Tourism Club to get off the ground.

For example, Wade and Patty Caseley have turned their Southwest River Farms operation in Burlington into an experience worth stopping for. During the summer months, the farm is a beehive of activity as visitors take advantage of the opportunity to learn how food is produced. The operation includes a farmer's market featuring Neen's Preserves (the couple purchased that company a couple of years ago) as well as other farm fresh products along with a gift shop. For the younger set, there are wagon rides and the chance to check out the goats. As well, the farm can offer educational workshops and tours for both individuals and groups.

The couple are a shining example of the what is required to for success in 21st century agriculture. It goes without the saying their farm must be environmentally sustainable in order to attract visitors. In that regard, they have been honoured on several occasions for their environmental initiative— the most recent being their award as runner-up for the 2004 Gilbert R. Clements award for Sustainable agriculture. They have also been honoured by the P.E.I. Soil and Crop Association.

In a time when less and less people have any direct link to agriculture, the younger generation in particular has little opportunity to see how food is produced. While an explanation of the

importance of agriculture might go over their head, give them an opportunity to see cattle being milked, or the chance to pet a horse or a lamb and they will be plenty interested.

The industry is just in its infancy in this province, but it has already achieved considerable successes in other areas. In British Columbia, it is responsible for 4,400 jobs while in Ontario it is a \$596 million industry annually. Wade added there are now even operations in the United States that instruct potential agri-tourism sites how to grow and maintain corn mazes like the one at Robinson's in Albany.

While conceding it is not for everyone, Wade said for their operation, agri-tourism has proven to be a major plank in the farm's long-term future. Already, the agri-tourism venture has led to the creation of ten seasonal jobs on their farm.

The provincial group, which currently has 17 members, is now in the process of developing a long-range strategic plan. Already, they have held a number of workshops and had on-farm evaluations from Brent Warner, whom Wade called the "guru" of the industry in British Columbia.

"We get close to one million visitors annually in the province and we have a major population center in New England only a few hours drive from here," Wade said. "The potential for this industry is huge and really only limited by the imagination."

The Humble Potato Has Long Been King of the Island Agricultural Industry.

That is now just as true for the organic industry as for its conventional counterparts. With help from the P.E.I. ADAPT Council (which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund in the province for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada), Raymond Loo has been conducting organic potato trials at his farm in Springfield for the past three years.

Loo, who is also president of the P.E.I. Certified Organic Producers Co-op, said the aim of the trial has been to determine which of 14 varieties grow best organically in the province. The long-time farmer said the aim of the research is to provide a level of comfort both to those who are in the organic industry right now and those who might be considering switching from conventional to organic that these are the varieties which work best.

"We don't need anybody to make the same mistakes," he said. Throughout the three years, Fabula and Divina have consistently been among the top producing varieties. The trials have produced yields in the majority of the 14 varieties of at least 250 hundredweight to the acre--comparable with conventional yields.

Loo, has been selling products from his Springfield organic farm to customers at the Charlottetown farmers market since 2000. At a time when the agricultural industry generally has been struggling to survive, he has increased sales by 25 per cent annually for the past four years. Loo said the number one lesson he has learned in the past four years— give the customer what they want. Previously, he had been packing his organic potatoes simply as Canada Number 1

with a mixture of sizes. However, the feedback he received from customers indicated "those who preferred smaller potatoes wanted all smaller potatoes and the same was true for people who wanted larger potatoes so we changed the way we package the product.

"The customer doesn't want the larger bags anymore— we sell more three and five pound bags now," he said. Loo said the farming community in general has not done a good job in making sure consumers receive the product they are looking for. In the case of potatoes, he said that should include information on how to prepare the product.

One variety he developed himself that was included in the trial — a bright yellow variety called Island Sunshine, has caught on well in Ontario but has not had a great deal of success in this province. Loo recalls he gave a bag to a friend who was used to eating white potatoes. When he asked her how she liked the potatoes, she admitted she threw them all out because they were yellow inside. He added "that's my fault— I didn't tell her."

The organic farmer said the industry not only has to do a better job of telling consumers about their product— he is convinced they also have to do a better job of listening to the feedback. He added "we have to make sure we are growing the varieties the consumer wants— not the varieties that we think are easiest to grow.

To help connect with their customers, Loo said his farm has developed a website which includes a virtual garden so consumers can monitor the progress from the garden to the marketplace. He said his operation has been able to achieve a premium price for its product.

Research Company Proud of Island Roots

The world "Canadian" may be a big part of its name, but a company that is conducting agricultural research around the globe is proud of its "made in P.E.I." roots.

Now, the Canadian Agri-Sustainability Partnership hopes to work with 12 primary producers across the province to help with that research. The company is receiving financial assistance from the P.E.I. ADAPT Council, which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural development Fund in the province for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

The company was the brainchild of four Islanders who are involved in the field of agricultural marketing and research— consultant Doug MacArthur, O'Leary veterinarian Gary Morgan, Wayne Hooper (who was with the Atlantic Veterinary College when the company was formed but is now deputy minister of agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture and has left the partnership) and Allan Parker, a West Prince businessman with agricultural interests in Russia. MacArthur said the partnership has grown and now involves 35 organizations across the country that are involved in all segments of the industry from production through to processing food safety.

"Our goal is to play a major role internationally in the area of food safety," MacArthur said. "The partnership was formed to promote Canadian agricultural expertise in the international

marketplace."

To help them meet that goal, he said the company wants the involvement of Island producers to help test products. For example, one of the group's recent projects involved the shipment of cattle embryos from P.E.I. to Russia, where they were transplanted into Russian cattle. As well, the partnership has been involved with a potato project in the Dmitrov region of Russia. For producers, he said working with the company would offer a prospect for additional income along with exposure for their products throughout the world. MacArthur said in addition to Russia, the partnership has projects in Serbia, Vietnam and Paraguay and "we are always looking for more."

MacArthur said the company has never forgotten its Island roots and uses experts and suppliers from P.E.I. whenever possible. He said having primary producers involved in the company's upcoming projects fits very much into that philosophy.

"We are proud of the level of expertise that exists right here on P.E.I.," MacArthur said. "We don't have to take a back seat to anybody else in the world."