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"My Chapter in Our Food Story"

Many people in today's society don't fully understand where their food originates. Consumers don't realize that their menu doesn't just appear in the grocery store; their food has a story. Whether it be a grain farmer working exhausting shifts to take the cereal crops off or it is a rancher putting blood, sweat and tears into making sure that their cattle are tended to with the utmost respect. I have had the privilege to witness both of these in a very personal way my whole life. Growing up on a mixed farm allows me to see the story behind our oils and breads, along with our burgers and steaks. I have taken a significant interest in the cattle side of our operation, even starting my own herd. In being a producer, I feel vast amounts of pressure from the consumers. They don't see what I do with my cattle, but they trust that by the time the meat hits their table, it will be safely sourced and healthy to eat. I feel it is my responsibility as a producer to produce good quality carcasses, treat my cattle with care, and keep their health as my number one concern. All three of these factors impact the meat at your supper table.

Many consumers do not know that the quality of meat varies based on the breed of cattle. Once I joined 4-H, I was allowed to start raising my own herd. I didn't want a Simmental, Hereford, Angus based commercial herd like my Dad, so I was dead set on finding something better. I started my research on what breed I wanted, and one unique breed stood out, Speckle Park. This breed is praised for being well-marbled, which adds tenderness, something all consumers adore. Speckle Park also has a thin layer of outer fat, which means less waste for the consumer. Consumers believe that Angus is the top breed for meat due to the old grading system, which classified "Angus" as the highest rank. Through 4-H, I have sold many steers that my buyers have then butchered for themselves. I have sold an array of breeds from Simmental, to Clubby, to Speckle Park. What I have found is that the Speckle Park meat always receives higher praise than the other breeds. Studies have shown that consumers want flavor, tenderness, and less fat, and they trust that the producers will strive to meet those requests. I am confident that with my breed choice, I have the potential to meet and exceed those expectations, but the care of the animals also impacts the outcome on the table.

The well-being of the cattle should be every rancher's number one priority. Many components affect the cattle's well-being; a happy cow is a healthy cow. Everything from the food they eat to the place they rest impacts the animals well being. It takes precise planning and analysis to construct a proper diet for the cattle. On our farm, we take time to calculate the exact amounts each pen should be eating based on their age, gestation length, condition and weather. We feed oat silage with added 18% silage enhancer pellet from our local co-op throughout the winter, and in the summer they graze wild grass. We also feed grass hay year-round. Along with feeding, the bedding provided for cattle impacts their well-being. They need a dry, sheltered area to rest. We spread barley straw around windbreaks through the cold months and ensure the cattle have dry land and trees in the pasture. Our penning arrangements are in a maintained, quiet area, which allows for less stress on the cattle. In today's day and age, there are more and more

consumers who are concerned with the animal treatment, so we ensure we treat our cattle with respect so that the consumer feels comfortable buying the product. Cattle can be easily stressed, which means their handling requires additional attention. We ensure all of our animals have human exposure, so it is not a shock when they require handling. When being handled, we embrace the herd mentality in cattle to move them around, which reduces stress. Our chute system is set up to smoothly allow for cattle to navigate through following one behind the other, the best technique to reduce stress. The chute system is often used to enforce our herd health program.

As I have previously stated, a happy cow is a healthy cow. Veterinarians frequently are helping ranchers create, update, and modify a herd health program designed specifically for their operation. These programs often include preventative and treatment drugs. Now that these drugs need to be purchased and approved by a licensed veterinarian, the herd health programs across the country are becoming more precise. Our herd health program includes administering Scourgaurd to bred cows before they calve to prevent calf sickness, Anthrax vaccine to cows before they go out to summer pastures and Ivermectin all cattle in the fall to treat and control parasites. Recently consumers have been interested in “antibiotic and hormone-free beef”, while this seems appealing, it is inhumane for ranchers. Just like humans, cattle need antibiotics to recover from illnesses; without antibiotics, they would die. Ranchers can’t stand by and watch the animals suffer, so they need to use the medicines, this is what the consumer doesn’t see. We follow the direction stated on the antibiotics to make sure that the meat is safe for human consumption. We do not give our cattle any hormones, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have any. Cows naturally produce their own hormones, just like all other plants and animals, meaning there is no such thing as “hormone-free beef”.

Consumer thoughts and ideologies impact all producers. Producers want to be able to satisfy the wants of a consumer, so they adapt aspects of their operation to suit that. The two don’t have personal connections; producers ship it out so that consumers can pick up the result. I sincerely wish that all consumers could have the privilege that I have had my whole life of watching their food’s story. It creates more profound respect and fulfillment when sitting down at the table to enjoy a locally-sourced meal.