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NEWS

Beef Tasting Compares Ten Heritage Breeds

By Don Schrider

On June 20, 2008, approximately 70 food professionals, chefs, food writers, and food connoisseurs gathered at Ayrshire Farm in Upperville, Virginia, to participate in "What's the Beef? An Historical Event." This blind-tasting compared beef from eight rare heritage breeds and two widely available breeds of cattle.

The mission of the event was to make a flavor comparison of beef from these ten breeds to demonstrate the culinary diversity they represent, as well as the value of conserving rare breeds. "We have to eat them to save them," said Sandy Lerner, the host for the tasting. "When we eat them, we are giving farmers an economic reason to conserve rare breeds and the important genetic diversity they represent."

The breeds tasted were: Ancient White Park, Angus, Dexter, Galloway, Highland, Milking Devon, Pineywoods, Randall Lineback, Red Poll, and (beef) Shorthorn. Many of these breeds are endangered and are considered important reservoirs of genetic diversity by ALBC. As examples of critically rare remnants of landrace cattle that helped found the United States, Pineywoods cattle are adapted to the deep South and Randall Lineback cattle are native to New England.

This unique event presented meat from the chuck section of a steer from each breed, roasted simply, without spices, cut into bite-sized pieces, and presented in covered dishes at numbered stations. Numbered toothpicks and scorecards were provided to aid in evaluating the beef. The meat was scored based on flavor, texture, tenderness, smell, and appearance.

After tasting the beef, the enthusiastic crowd was asked to vote for their favorite

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Meat from the chuck section of a steer of each breed was roasted simply, without spices, cut into bite-sized pieces, and presented in covered dishes at numbered stations. Numbered toothpicks and scorecards were provided. Photos by, clockwise from upper left, Ayrshire Farm, Kristi Bahrenburg Janzen, and Glenda Kapsalis.

Beef Tasting

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number before the breed identities were revealed. The winner of the popular vote in this ground-breaking tasting was the Randall Lineback, with second place going to the Galloway and third to the Dexter. The top three favorites each received nearly twice as many votes for first place as any of the other breeds tasted.

Though some breeds had few supporters as first choice, it should be noted that many of these breeds garnered second and third placements on individuals' tally cards. "I was amazed how different people preferred different breeds to such an extent that there was no obvious winner," remarked Kristi Bahrenburg Janzen of Edible Chesapeake.

All but three of the breeds – the Milking Devon, the Randall Lineback, and the Red Poll – had been finished on Ayrshire Farm, fed an organic finishing feed, and raised and processed humanely, following Humane Farm Animal Care's standards. The Randall Lineback was grown and finished on Chapel Hill Farm. The Milking Devon and the Red Poll were grass-finished as there were no steers available to finish on grain due to rarity and herd reductions following the drought of 2007.

This event was the largest comparison of beef breeds in North America to date and it successfully demonstrated that each of these breeds is valuable for the unique culinary experience it offers.



Tasting attendees were very careful as they evaluated the taste, texture, aroma, and appearance of the meat samples. Photo by Ayrshire Farm.

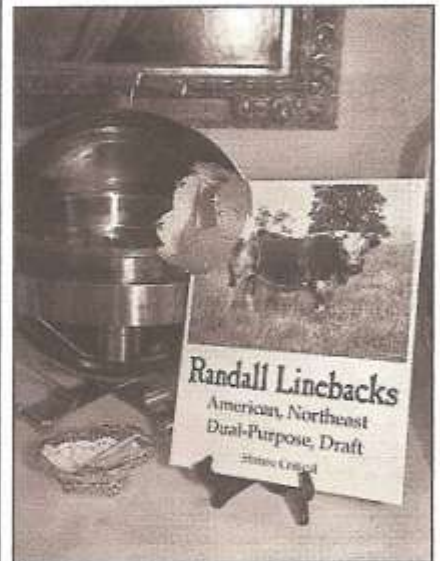


Many attendees were surprised that they could tell differences between breeds during this blind tasting. The winner of the popular vote was revealed to be the Randall Lineback. Photos by Glenda Kapsalis.

To quote one attendee, Lina Burton of The Mercer House, "And the beef – who would have thought that they really *did* taste different, and were so much better than what is available commercially in the supermarket?" ♦

"What's the Beef? An Historical Event" was produced through a partnership of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, Humane Farm Animal Care, Slow Food USA, and Ayrshire Farm.

For more information on the beef breeds, placings, hosting organizations, or cattle facts, visit: <http://www.ayrshirefarm.com/tasting/beef/>



The event was a great place to network and meet people. After his presentation on rare breeds, ALBC's former Board President, Gary Sojka, shakes hands with Humane Farm Animal Care's Executive Director, Adele Douglas. Photo by Glenda Kapsalis.