

Land Lines

Meat With a Story

By Cindy Salo

The Boise Farmers Market is a four-block-long party that shuts down streets and reroutes city buses every Saturday from April to Christmas. On the north side of Idaho Street a knot of shoppers gathers each week at the Malheur River Meats booth, where Rob Stokes presides.

Sporting a Marine's haircut and a marathon runner's build, Rob displays the quiet calm of a seasoned school-teacher and the helpfulness of an older brother. The label on each package of his beef, pork, chicken, and turkey says "Natural meat with a story." He tells that story every Saturday. When he is not pulling packages of frozen meat or cartons of eggs out of ice chests, he is the lone participant in a quiz show where an ever-changing audience asks the questions.

I stopped a few times to listen to Rob's story and ask him some questions. Then I visited him and Michelle, his wife and business partner, who operates the Malheur River Meats booth at the Nampa Farmers Market down the road. I learned that the couple did not grow up on ranches, but were early innovators in the natural meat business. I saw that they raise animals using techniques that my parents remember from their childhoods. But my parents left farms for cushier lives in teaching, the profession you can always fall back on. Michelle and Rob chose to work on the land and are using old-fashioned techniques to meet new consumer demands.

Selling Directly to Consumers

Every Saturday during market season Rob and Michelle fill their truck with eggs and hitch up a trailer loaded with freezers of meat. Michelle's mother walks over from her house across the yard at about 5 AM to wait for the Stokeses' two young daughters to wake up. By the time the girls are eating breakfast, their parents are setting up Michelle's booth at the Nampa Farmers Market. Then Rob drives another 20 miles to the Boise Market.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that there are over 7,000 farmers markets in the country in 2011, a 17% increase over 2010. The markets have blossomed as people demand to know more about how their food is

produced. Buying directly from producers allows consumers to support local businesses and develop personal relationships with the people who provide their food. Selling directly to consumers give producers the opportunity to tell their story. People also look for local food when they eat out. Chefs surveyed by the National Restaurant Association named locally produced meat the number-one hottest trend for 2011.

Each Malheur River Meats label describes their natural meat as minimally processed, containing no artificial ingredients, and produced by their own grass-fed, pasture-raised animals that are raised using humane practices and without antibiotics, synthetic hormones, or animal by-products. Their products are certified as Animal Welfare Approved by the Animal Welfare Institute.

Many shoppers at the Boise Farmers Market are concerned about the current level of antibiotic use in livestock production, which can lead to the development of drug-resistant bacteria. Others are looking for meat that is produced without hormones. Several of Rob's customers told me that they are willing to pay more for products from animals that are treated humanely.

One shopper made a 2-hour drive to learn more about how Michelle and Rob raise and process their meat. The man's wife had called several local butchers with the same questions; one butcher hung up on her. While he was bagging up his purchases, the man asked Rob if he got tired of answering the same questions over and over.

"No, I actually like it," Rob said. "I like that people are thinking about things and that they appreciate what we do, because we work pretty hard to get everything here."

Early Innovators in Natural Meat

In the early 1990s Rob and Michelle were recent California State University–Chico graduates with newly awarded degrees in Animal Science. Neither had family farms or ranches to go home to on college weekends, so they had worked at Cal State's livestock operation and taken on substantial responsibilities there.

Bill Niman started raising livestock on the northern coast of California during the back-to-the-land movement of the



Photo 1. Shoppers talking with Rob at the Boise Farmers Market. Photo by author.

1970s. By the early 1990s his Niman Ranch products had become so popular in Bay Area restaurants and grocery stores that he needed to expand his operation. Bill was looking for people with livestock experience who could develop innovative approaches to meeting the increasing demand for humanely raised natural meats. The Stokeses became the third and fourth employees at Niman Ranch.

In the 1990s, many of Niman Ranch's practices were still unusual. "When we first started looking for cattle, the traditional producers laughed," said Michelle. "Not to be mean," she went on, "but because they honestly didn't think anyone could produce beef without hormone implants or antibiotics."

During the 14 years they spent with the company, Rob and Michelle played major roles in making it a leader in the natural meat industry. In *The Niman Ranch Cookbook* Bill said, "I'm convinced that the main reason our beef is so good is because of Rob and Michelle Stokes. They're purists... and they don't believe in cutting corners or taking shortcuts."

When Niman Ranch expanded to Idaho, the Stokeses moved to Caldwell, west of Boise. They bought land just over the Oregon border, near Vale, and began raising some of their own livestock as well. In 2006 Niman Ranch changed ownership and, after helping with the transition, Michelle and Rob had the opportunity to focus on developing their own business full time.

On a spread that a Texan might think is just large enough to provide adequate privacy for a home site, the Stokeses raise grass-fed and grass-finished beef, goat meat, and pasture-raised eggs, pork, and heritage turkey.

Meeting Consumer Demand

I spent a cool fall morning with Michelle and Rob and their family. I saw cattle too busy grazing to pay any attention to me, pigs rooting in the soil and enjoying a good back scratch from a small child, chickens scratching after insects, goats

dwarfed by the basin wild rye in their pasture, and livestock guard dogs watching for coyotes.

The Stokeses' animals are moved regularly to fresh pastures. This provides clean places for them to live, eliminates manure management problems, and allows the vegetation to regrow. Each species is fed an appropriate diet in addition to their pasture. Rotating pastures among different species uses vegetation more evenly, helps manage weeds, and reduces parasite problems. This careful management means that the Stokeses do not need or use fertilizer, herbicides, or pesticides on their pastures.

Angus Beef for Local Farmers Markets

The Stokeses have partnered with another family with similar ideals and goals to produce their beef. Mike and Linda Bentz are fifth-generation ranchers whose families trace the Oregon cattle industry from the historic Whitehorse Ranch to the founding of Country Natural Beef. The latter provides antibiotic- and hormone-free beef to national grocery store and restaurant chains.

Angus calves are born on the Bentzes' ranch in Juntura, Oregon, where they remain through their second summer. They travel east to the Stokeses' in Vale when they are a year and a half old. They continue to develop another 6 months to a year before being processed. Rob and Michelle find that their grass-fed and grass-finished cattle continue to improve until they reach a carcass weight of about 750 pounds. After processing, the beef continues its eastward migration to the Nampa and Boise markets and then goes home with customers.

Producing and consuming beef within such a small geographic area contrasts sharply with the usual model. Most cattle crisscross the county on trips to auction, feedlot, processor, wholesaler, warehouse, and then grocery store. Each time the cattle are shipped they move farther from the land and each time they are sold they lose more of their story.



Photo 2. The Stokes family checks their pigs (and admires their mud packs). Photo by author.



Photo 3. Laying hens enjoy the morning sun. Photo by author.

Pasture-Raised Pork

The pigs I met on my visit were mostly Durocs, a breed with plentiful back fat that keeps them comfortable outdoors in cool Oregon winters. Michelle and Rob have added some Large Black boars recently. This rare heritage breed is becoming more popular because of its docile nature and ability to thrive on pasture living.

The Stokeses' pigs farrow twice each year, in the spring and fall. Expectant sows are given clean sheds, where the mothers-to-be build comfortable nests for their litters. After a quiet life rooting in pastures to supplement their vegetarian diet, the pigs become roasts, chops, and sausage for the farmers markets. Rob and Michelle are working with the USDA to develop a nitrate-free cure for their pork products. Egg buyers have been wistfully asking about nitrate-free bacon all summer and looking forward an entirely local and humanely raised breakfast dish.

Colorful Eggs, Inside and Out

The Stokeses more than doubled their laying flock this year when they welcomed hens from a nearby chick producer. The hens had produced one batch of downy, peeping chicks, after which the producer will replace them with a new flock next season rather than waiting for the hens to molt and begin laying again.

The new hens were surprised to find bright sunshine and spiky green grass full of intriguing insects at their new home. The Stokeses spent the first several days searching the

pasture for eggs, until the new arrivals settled in and realized that the nest boxes in the henhouse were comfortable and safe places to lay eggs.

The current flock is a rainbow of hens that produce eggs of various colors: Rhode Island Red, Barred Rock, Americana, and Naked Neck (the most likely to be embarrassed about their appearance). Customers enjoy the potluck of colors in each carton but are more impressed with the deep yellow yolks inside. One had to cook with other eggs when they ran short: "It was like making an egg-white omelet." Another found that other eggs had "shells like tissue paper" by comparison.

Michelle and Rob sell about 40 dozen brown, white, tan, and green eggs each week, but they could each sell more. Egg shoppers who arrive late go home with only a promise from Rob that he will encourage his hens to buckle down and work harder. Savvy shoppers buy their eggs early and ask him to keep them in the ice chest until they are done with their other shopping.

Goat, the Latest "New" Meat

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal, West Africa, I enjoyed goat meat as a holiday break from meals of leaf sauce, peanut sauce flavored with dried fish, or silver dollar-sized tilapia. On holiday mornings one of my host family's young goats would vanish and reappear later, in delicious pieces, in our food bowl.

Chefs in the Bay Area have discovered the Stokeses' pasture-raised goat and made it the hot "new" meat in upscale restaurants. Rob and Michelle ship hundreds of head to California each year, where they are processed and sent to restaurants.

The herd is mostly Boers, a breed from South Africa, although other bloodlines are being added to increase milk production and produce goats with better feet and legs. Some of the new billies have worked themselves out of jobs



Photo 4. Goats on basin wild rye pasture. Photo by author.

at small breeders because of their attitude toward humans. When the tough guys get to the Stokeses' place they find an entire herd of billies. "They realize, hey we're all in the same boat; there's no sense fighting," Rob told me. "And there's more to do here, so they're not bored. They can take their frustration out on a fence post instead of going after people."

The goats sometimes earn their keep by working off the farm. Winter may find them cleaning a neighbor's alfalfa field or controlling brush in California. The herd is back home in April, when baby kids are a doe's ticket to a couple of days in a private suite in the barn. Inside temporary pens made from recycled lumber, the new family gets to know each other while the Stokeses and their kidding-season helpers keep a close eye on everyone. Helpers include Michelle's parents, local high school students, a few friends, and an annual intern from the University of Idaho's Caine Veterinary Teaching Center in Caldwell.

When does have more than two kids, the extras are raised by foster mother dairy goats. "More than two is hard on the does," Rob explained. "We were getting damaged udders when three kids were fighting over two teats." The dairy mothers kid in February, so they are ready to raise a second family when the meat kids arrive. Using foster nannies is also a tremendous time-saver compared to bottle feeding the extra kids. "It used to take us hours to feed all those bottles," Rob remembered.

Fewer Inputs, More Management

Rob and Michelle watch their livestock closely and know each one. This allows them to give each animal individual care. They find that careful management and a thoughtful breeding program provide results equal to hormone implants. Raising animals on pasture, moving them frequently, and rotating species substitute for dosing animals with antibiotics and parasiticides. Raising animals on pasture and rotating species also eliminate the need for chemical fertilizer and herbicides.

The Stokeses can substitute excellent management for expensive inputs because they are a small producer. They would like to expand, someday, but with one caveat. "We'll do it as long as we can keep up the quality," Michelle said. "Keeping control of the quality of our products is our number-one concern."

Additional Reading

U.S. FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION. 2010. The judicious use of medically important antimicrobial drugs in food-producing animals. Available at: <http://www.fda.gov/downloads/AnimalVeterinary/GuidanceComplianceEnforcement/GuidanceforIndustry/UCM216936.pdf>.

Cindy Salo is a freelance plant ecologist who works and writes in Boise, ID, USA, cindysaloboise@gmail.com.