

Alberta Beef a Smash in N.Y.

Restaurants test 'natural' product

MAIRI MacLEAN
Journal Business Writer
EDMONTON

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Hormone-free Angus beef from Alberta is making its debut on dinner plates at Tony Steak Houses in New York City and Chicago and garnering boffo reviews.

U.S. food entrepreneur Jeff Moats recently bought his first truckload of "natural" red Angus and black Angus beef – 18,000 kilograms in all – as part of a three-month test with the New York Restaurant Group.

The group, which has 14 properties around the U.S., is testing the beef at Smith & Wollensky, its high-end steak houses in Chicago and Philadelphia, and Maloney & Porcelli's, a trendy steak and chop house in mid-town Manhattan.

"We're testing this natural, hormone-free barley-fed Alberta beef, getting feedback from customers who are saying, "I enjoyed it,... it's of very high quality, with good taste," said David Burke, spokesperson for Smith & Wollensky in New York. "It's more expensive than regular cuts – almost 20 per cent higher. People quite like it."

Smith & Wollensky is charging \$40 U.S. per serving for a 16-ounce portion of the Alberta tenderloin and prime rib - \$5 more than it charges customers for U.S. prime Angus beef, says Moats, on the phone from Ohio.

"In New York, it sold out in two hours," says Moats. "This is the very early stage and we're thrilled. We can't be more excited."

The beef hit menus in Chicago last weekend and will be served in Philadelphia beginning this weekend.

"We'll be testing it for three months, and then decide whether we'll be

going full force," said Burke, noting that his steak houses are also dry-aging strip loin and rib steaks from Alberta beef.

Moats, who has spent the past decade importing food products from Brazil and marketing them to "white linen tablecloth" restaurants in major U.S. cities, was introduced to "natural" beef by his Alberta in-laws. Angus cattle from "ranches from every corner of the province" and parts of Saskatchewan were finished at Highland Feeders of Vegreville before the beef was processed and shipped to Moats' New York distributor.

Moats says it was easy to sell the choice cuts "at a super premium," but he's still looking for premium markets for the remaining 80 per cent of the beef carcass. The remainders from the first truckload were sold into the conventional beef market at a loss.

"I can't call Edmonton and order 10 boxes of meat, I have to take the whole carcass. It's great for Canada because you sell the whole animal, but it's murderous scenario for us because... we can get the right dollars for the middle cuts, but we can't approach the percentage increases for all the other cuts," he says. "We're working very hard on those markets."

Moats is also working with Smith & Wollensky to develop a private-label brand destined for retail grocery stores.

"We do have some grocery store chains, very high end, asking us for dry-aged natural Alberta beef."

In Edmonton, natural Angus beef is available at the Urban fare grocery store.