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Natural beef raised with pride

Dinner at Spring Creek Ranch an utterly succulent feast

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VEGREVILLE - You might remember a vintage television commercial that featured a little old lady yelling, "Where's the beef?"

A Vegreville rancher named Bern Kotelko could have eased her mind. He raises the beef, and it's fantastic.

On a winter's night, the smell of mesquite smoke and grilled meat -- a flatiron steak and a bone-in rib-eye, as it happens -- floats into his kitchen. It's coming from an outdoor grill and a brand new smoker. With his trademark Stetson worn low over his brow, Bern doesn't exactly hover, but he is watching those steaks like a hawk. A moment's inattention can ruin good beef.

His wife, Donna, and daughter/business partner, Kirstin, are in charge of the rest of the menu: butter lettuce with sliced pears and blue cheese with a balsamic drizzle; stacks of grilled eggplant, red onion and tomatoes; and a gratin of potatoes with fennel.

Like this dinner, the ranch is a family affair. The Kotelkos raise premium beef near Vegreville, where Bern and brother Mike own and operate Highland Feeders, with some 36,000 head of mixed-breed cattle.

Kirstin, with a business degree in agriculture/food, is the president of their branded beef program, Spring Creek Ranch, where hand-selected cattle represent between 10 and 20 per cent of their total population now, increasing every year. These animals have a strong streak of Angus in them for their good marbling tendency, and from the day of their birth, they get special treatment.

"They're raised 10 to 12 months in very low-stress conditions on the ranch where they were born," says Bern. "Then there's another six months of carefully controlled feeding to develop the marbling (the intra-muscular fat that makes Spring Creek beef so juicy and tender)."

Into the kitchen comes a platter of still-sizzling beef, ready for sampling. Everybody hunkers around the kitchen island while Bern slices the smoked flatiron steak, offering it with a bowl of his secret recipe barbecue sauce, now bottled and sold at retail.

"The flatiron got a real quick grill, then 40 minutes in the smoker," he says. "It's a highly marbled part of the chuck, but from the front of the muscle that doesn't get a lot of use. Really tender, and great flavour."

He cuts the rib-eye off the bone for easier carving. Gnawing happily on the excised rib, he explains why this meat is so utterly succulent.

"This is natural beef, carefully selected, patiently fed, raised in a humane, stress-free

environment. That's how you produce healthy cattle."

The Kotelkos are fussy, you might even say obsessive, about things like genetics, record keeping, and the integrity of their suppliers. Donna wants us to understand that beef this good is no accident.

"I remember a very different way of raising cattle," she says, and we know by her voice that it wasn't pretty. "We buy from the farmers who meet our standards. On this ranch, our animals are comfortable, clean and well-fed."

The Kotelkos have developed a verification system that tracks each of their roughly 36,000 head, all the way from birth on the farm of origin to the federal inspection of the meat. Their cattle eat a carefully formulated vegetarian diet of grain and forage enriched with vitamin E. They are never given growth hormones, animal-byproducts or, according to the carefully targeted advertising, antibiotics.

Yet, if an animal gets sick, the law requires that it be medicated. So what happens then?

"If an animal in the Spring Creek program requires antibiotics, it will be moved into the regular feedlot after medication," says Bern. "It can't go back into our Spring Creek program."

After decades in beef production, the Kotelkos have become greener than green. They're justifiably proud of their environmental record.

"We harvest the manure into an anaerobic digester, where it generates enough electricity for our own operation here. It could actually power the entire town of Vegreville. But we've decided to go a step farther in the future, and develop an ethanol plant," says Bern. "In this way, we demonstrate that agriculture can do its part toward a smaller carbon footprint."

Their success in the beef business is impressive on every front. There's the private plane and the helicopter, useful for ferrying various chefs back and forth to the ranch, or making a fast trip to a meeting in Calgary. There are all the awards, so many they'd have to think hard to count them all.

What matters most, however, is their relationships with the people who buy their beef "because it's so good."

"Events like BSE are out of our control," says Bern. "So we work hard to maintain an excellent relationship with our domestic market, and it pays off.

"During BSE, it was the Canadians, the Albertans, who stepped up for us and kept on eating beef."

Spring Creek Ranch beef is sold fresh (never frozen) and is featured at restaurants such as Culina, Characters, Jack's Grill, Flavours Modern Bistro, the Harvest Room, the Upper Crust and Madison's Grill. For more information, go to www.springcreek.ca

BUTTER LETTUCE SALAD WITH PEARS AND BLUE CHEESE

Serves 6

- 2 heads butter lettuce, leaves separated
- 2 ripe pears, sliced

- 4 oz (125 g) blue cheese
- balsamic vinaigrette

Arrange lettuce leaves on 6 plates. Top with sliced pears. Crumble blue cheese over each plate and drizzle with a balsamic vinaigrette of your choice.

KIRSTIN'S POTATO & FENNEL GRATIN

Serves 8 to 10

- 1 large yellow onion
- 2 large fennel bulbs
- 1 tablespoon (15 mL) olive oil
- 8 cups (2 L) thinly sliced Russet potatoes
- 1 1/2 cups (375 mL) cream
- 1 1/2 cups (375 mL) grated Swiss cheese
- salt and pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon (2 mL) fresh ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon (5 mL) fennel seeds, bruised
- 1 tablespoon (15 mL) fresh chopped parsley

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Remove tops from fennel. Slice the bulbs in half and thinly slice. Do the same with the yellow onion.

Combine fennel, onion and olive oil in a pan. Sauté until soft.

Peel potatoes and slice into thin rounds. In a large bowl, mix the cream, all but 2 tablespoons of cheese (reserve for topping), salt, pepper, nutmeg and fennel. Add potatoes, fennel and onion to the cream and cheese. Butter a deep round pan. Pour the mixture into the pan and press down with hands. Top with remaining grated cheese, cover with foil and bake for 45 minutes. Remove foil and bake another 15 minutes, or until liquid has absorbed and potatoes are soft. Top with fresh parsley and let the gratin sit for 10 minutes before serving.

BARBECUED SPRING CREEK RIB-EYE

One of the secrets of this particular beef is that it's never been frozen, and it's properly aged before it gets near your barbecue.

Because it's so tender, it needs no marinades unless you insist. Wiping it with a seasoned oil before grilling is about all you should do.

There's no recipe for a good steak, but there's a method.

Begin with your beef at room temperature. Some chefs sear their steaks in a very

hot pan for mere seconds before transferring to the barbecue grill.

For a 1-inch (2.5-cm) steak, grill 3 to 5 inches above the coals, for 3 to 5 minutes per side for rare, 5 to 7 minutes for medium, and 9 to 11 minutes for (heaven forbid) well done. Turn it once only -- never more. Let it rest about 5 minutes, foil-covered if you wish, so the juices can set before carving.

For more information on Spring Creek beef, go to www.springcreek.ca

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