

Session 1 - Bringing Local Meat into the Good Food Dialogue

Panelists:

Noel Bielaczyc – MSU CRFS

Grant Fletcher – System Director, Healthy Living & Sustainability, Bronson Healthcare

Dennis Heffron – Owner/Operator, Heffron Farms

Ted Vaughn – President/Owner, Tolman's Wholesale Meat

Jude Barry gives introductions of all panelists.

Noel – specialist at CRFS

Works in local distribution, meat & livestock in MI

This is the first meat-focused session at the Good Food Summit

Talking about good food tends to be fruit & veg, sometimes eggs & dairy

Protein is a missed opportunity

Often talk about local/regional meat as a niche product for a high-end market, but would like to make these products accessible to a wider range of places in Michigan

Michigan Meat Network – business-to-business network for livestock producers, meat processors & food service professionals. Aim is to build markets and value chain connections for local & regional meat in MI

Open to those who'd like to get involved, talk to Noel or Jude for more info

Grant – what's your role? How does meat fit into strategic plan for Bronson and good food more generally?

Want to do as much local/regional sourcing as possible

In a good position on most low-hanging fruit (baked goods, produce) at this point (esp. via partnership with Kalamazoo Valley Community College)

Want to create a Southwest MI network that is not just for Bronson, but for schools, etc

Have cultivated direct relationships with farmers in the region – their local sourcing is not done via broadliners like GFS

See opportunity to shift \$ and grow small businesses in food sector in Southwest MI

Denny

5th-gen farm, other farms that were in the area 20 years ago have been pushed out, Heffron made changes to stay viable

Consumers more interested now in where product comes from

25-30 employees, products in 4 retail stores, partnering with other local farms now

Difficult for institutions to source local – lots of beef raised in MI, but as it's processed it leaves the state (often for multiple places)

Consumer doesn't want current setup, but industry not arranged to accommodate that

His farm raises cattle differently than big outfits, don't stress the animals, get a better product this way. Also refuse to make some products (that institutions are interested in) b/c they're unhealthy.

Ted

Excited the conversation is happening, there's a huge opportunity

Small farms are creating jobs

Works in HRI (hotel, restaurant, institution), no retail sales

Distributors do fine job but we can do better

Issue of sustainability and capacity, getting players together to be able to supply what is needed

Noel – meat is less seasonal than produce, so it can be part of local sourcing year-round

Denny – yes, meat is most stable in terms of year-round availability

Question from Noel: Costs, strategies for working around costs, how can supply be grown to eventually bring costs down?

Grant

Example of eggs – actually found savings by switching from egg-like products to just local free-range eggs. Avian flu sent price of conventional institutional eggs up.

Have found that drafting the menu around availability makes them leaner in the kitchen, which allows for good work without significant increase in costs.

Formerly bought frozen meatloaf from distributor. Chef worked on developing new recipe with more root veg and 1/3 less meat content, and it met with wild success (kept selling out). Now are selling meatloaf hamburger sliders that are a huge success – reduced costs, increased margin, local sourcing and healthier product

Ted

“good” food – every protein has cuts that are healthy

bigger picture is in health outcomes – diabetes, etc

costs may be lower in the short-term, but not the long term

Denny

Heffron makes a lean ground beef product and sells fat/trimmings to a competitor

Bronson's managed a win-win in getting creative and making a healthier product, vs just going cheaper

Bringing it back to question from Noel re. production – How can/should we grow supply to bring down costs? Need for more farmers, or what makes product more expensive

Denny

Product is more expensive

Have learned to listen to the consumer; must be value for them

People are concerned about quality of the product (hormones, dyes) – these don't add value for consumer, but keeping these out makes product a little more expensive

As things ratchet up, smaller producers drop out

MI produces lots of beef & dairy – puzzle pieces are there but need to put them together

If Heffron had to compete in big world, it would be much more difficult

Bigger places can have smaller margin and remain viable (You can manage on \$10/pig if you're selling 1 million pigs, but not if you're selling 100 pigs)

Ted

Potential to maintain retail prices (with the added value) and partner with institutions & processors to find uses for more undesirable cuts, things that wouldn't move in retail

Importance of partnerships

Grant

Working to address missing piece – take institutional energy to build back up young farmers

Part of job as buyers is to demonstrate there's a business case and a demand; want community to benefit

Would be easy to go to big distributors and make demands re. meat, but would rather know exactly who raised it, what's their connection in the region, rather than just have a different label on products coming on the same truck

QUESTION: Jae – works with Extension in Washtenaw Co

Limited knowledge of meat

Talked about local purchasing with a retailer, meat buyer came in and said they'd love to buy local meat and that people coming to the store would love to buy a local product.

However, not interested in working with processor, etc – essentially want something that will just show up at their store.

Ted – to sell to retail, must go through USDA slaughter plant and manage transportation

Most processing happens in the bottom 1/3 of the state

Denny – same loss of small players in farming has happened on the processing side as well

Basically just one facility for processing cattle

Last year went to meeting with nat'l restaurant distributor. Distributor is getting pressure from institutions and retail, to put a farm name on the meat restaurants are getting, and current setup can't necessarily even name the state it's coming from.

Ted – processing is a tough business, only a couple places left

Once there's only a few, they can dictate what they're willing to pay farmers

Grant – local sourcing of meat can be done, but not through a distributor – need the personal relationships with producers.

Having the conversation now about how to build this and fill in the puzzle in SW MI

QUESTION: Challenge of selling “everything but the squeal” – especial challenge for smaller producers. How is increased use of ground vs prime cuts shaping things? While in South Africa, asker was amazed by amount of sausages, most processing is local and only way to get “everything but squeal” sold is by adding it to grind.

Ted – from pork standpoint, bacon is on fire; the margins on this will carry a lot of other cuts

Comparatively speaking, pork is cheap protein

b/c of shelf life, things with shorter shelf life will end up ground (beef has longer time)

Denny – factor of the economy

Before downturn, couldn't keep high-end cuts stocked, then situation flipped and couldn't keep up with demand for low-end cuts

A lot of restaurants now using whole range; pretty balanced at the moment

Heffner raises & markets, works with 5 processors

On the nonprofit side, there is always a market for grind/low-end cuts.

QUESTION/COMMENT: With vegetables, we can also encourage people to have their own garden; it's harder to do this with livestock. How then can we build that relation to 'where does meat come from'?

Livestock can have a role to play in waste mgmt, etc

QUESTION: Keep hearing that 1) small farms are unfeasible and 2) we need more young farmers

Wondering what successful co-ops would look like for young meat farmers

Wondering whether small farmers can reliably get appointments with processors, and when sending product to processor whether they consistently get that product back.

Ted – can definitely get back the product you send to processor

There will be people who get into farming, b/c of passion, and as demand increases there are more opportunities for people to get into it

Denny – philosophy of comparability: you have to like what you're doing, and there's money in anything *if* you're doing it right. Previously was raising cattle, and couldn't make money – operation worked and fit together, but wasn't making money. Had to make some changes to succeed

Little guys can work together, and there's potential for everyone at different points in the system to benefit

Grant – loves idea of co-op

Noel – institutional market is exceptionally tough to get into – not the place for beginning farmers to start.

QUESTION: Are there any case studies of this? Noel doesn't know of these but it would be interesting to explore further

QUESTION: Intersection of encouraging local farmers & healthy eating -- As farmers & processors, how do you see meat as part of healthy diet?

Denny – doctors refer people to Heffron often b/c iron deficiencies, etc; healthy diet definitely has a place for meat

Ted – meat is protein, lots of B vitamins

Meat isn't going away; bacon is super popular and it's one of fattiest cuts

Grant – more than ever, conversation not about eliminating meat

When he changes menu and reduces meat, gets pushback from dietitians b/c especially in hospital they want to make sure people are eating enough, getting good nourishment

Partnered with KVCC on curriculum to bring conversation about good food over to medical professionals at the hospital

Noel – production practices also a piece of this, and institutions can drive that convo

QUESTION: student with Just Food Collective @ Kalamazoo College

Get pushback from new food service mgmt on the issue of improving meat – too expensive

Ted – as customer, have influence if you say you'll buy somewhere else

Noel – maybe boneless skinless chicken isn't comparable in price, but a bone-in thigh would work; using unconventional cuts & thinking outside the box

QUESTION: re. origin labeling, what happened to country of origin labeling?

Ted – hospitals will require this anyway. Not an issue to get this info, if you put it in your spec & require it

Noel – every cow in MI has RFID tag and can be tracked back to the farm (though not currently used unless there's an outbreak)

In MI, can't slaughter cattle over 30 mos old b/c of BSE

Denny – was in chain store, ground beef had country of origin & listed 5 countries

Animal tagging is great but only goes up until the processor

Think consumer demand will drive better tracking in the future