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Muscling In From Kansas

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ARKANSAS CITY, Kan.

FAIR warning to anyone repulsed by succulent sirloin, robust rib-eye, primal porterhouse and tender T-bone: Avert your eyes. The following report is definitely not your meat.

Over the past 18 months, tender, flavorful Black Angus beef from an ultra-modern plant amid table-flat farms dotted with pecan groves and patches of green winter wheat has roiled steak-and-burger-mad New York.

Out of nowhere, seemingly, Creekstone Farms Premium Beef has challenged established red-meat royals like Niman Ranch, selling as much as four times more meat, by some estimates. Creekstone meat is served at many of the city's high-profile restaurants, including Babbo, Balthazar, Café Boulud, China Grill, Del Posto, Pastis, Porterhouse New York and the Standard Grill, as well as the Shake Shack burger joints. The newcomer mesmerized Marea, Tabla and Primehouse New York into printing its name on their menus.

Indeed, Michael White, the chef and an owner of Marea, along with Alto and Convivio, can't say enough about "the taste and the tenderness" of this arriviste protein, which he calls "a very superior product." Nonbelievers, on the other hand, view Creekstone's ascent as a triumph of canny marketing and tenacious salesmanship.

Inarguably, the Johnny Appleseed of the brand in the tough-to-crack New York City market has been Mark Pastore, the chief operating officer of Pat LaFrieda Wholesale Meat Purveyors Inc., the exclusive distributor for Creekstone in the Northeast. In any given week LaFrieda, with more than \$40 million in annual revenues, pays \$300,000 to \$400,000 for two loads of meat shipped from Arkansas City, just north of the Oklahoma border.

"I shake the hands and kiss the babies," said Mr. Pastore, 35. His method for motivating many top restaurants to try Creekstone, he said, was just to



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CREEKSTONE FARMS

be in their face "with terrific beef."

Beyond being a testament to Mr. Pastore's baby-bussing prowess, the rise of Creekstone is a result of the huge demand for beef that can satisfy both epicurean and ethical demands.

Close to a fourth of Creekstone's meat is "natural," meaning free from antibiotics and growth-producing hormones; cattle are given vegetarian feed and, as a quality-control measure, it is noted which ranch each came from. In 2005, after adopting stringent standards, the company won certification to provide its highest-end products to the European Union, Japan and Korea.

"We want to know that the animals are raised responsibly," said Riad Nasr, an executive chef at Minetta Tavern.

And customers do, too, because "they can't trust the regulators," said Malcolm M. Knapp, who heads a restaurant consulting company in Manhattan that bears his name. "These days, diners can use their phones right in the restaurant to check beef out on the Internet. And they do."

Creekstone partisans point to its single-facility operation, which affords better supervision, and its Corn Belt cattle from Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa and Oklahoma. Some of Creekstone's

cachet has derived from the perception that it was "courageous" in standing up to the meat industry, said the food historian Betty Fussell, whose 2008 book, "Raising Steaks: The Life and Times of American Beef" (Houghton Mifflin), sounded alarms about factory-farmed beef.

In 2004 Creekstone opposed the United States Department of Agriculture, and won enemies in the business, by demanding the right to test every one of its cattle — at \$20 a head — for mad cow disease. In 2008 a federal appeals court ruled against it, but Ms. Fussell said that the company "has turned that to its advantage" in image-making.

Creekstone began 20 years ago on a farm in Campbellsburg, Ky., that is depicted on its logo. "Despite the word 'farm,' this is not your local little operation; it is an industrial beef company," Ms. Fussell said. "They've found a very clever way to market themselves."

Creekstone is now a subsidiary of Sun Capital Partners Inc., a private equity firm that has invested in more than 200 companies, with total sales of more than \$37 billion over the last 15 years.

Creekstone cattle are hand-picked by eight roving field buyers. Ryan Meyer, the company's director of cattle pro-

curement, said its most elite meat derives from about 100 ranches supplying just 15 feed yards; beef from other companies can come from thousands of ranches.

One of Creekstone's sources is the 7,000-acre spread in Goff, Kan., owned by Gary Pfrang, 53, a fifth-generation cattleman. He raises 1,500 head a year, along with the corn they are fed after they have eaten pasture grass for more than a year.

He fattens them himself in pens that offer "plenty of room — more room than in one of those condos in New York," Mr. Pfrang said feistily, "because if they're crowded and stressed," they won't grade as prime at Creekstone.

Though many ranches misrepresent the purity of their Angus genetics, "we can prove ours," Mr. Pfrang said. "We have been tracking our cow families since 1948, and we've worked on their genetics, retaining the best offspring and turning them back into our herd."

In the cut and thrust of meat distribution, "there are many fine suppliers of Angus beef," said Stephanie Crane Faison, spokeswoman for DeBragga & Spitler, the Manhattan meatpacking-district stalwart. DeBragga, which wouldn't discuss its revenues, sells steaks to Daniel, Patroon, Gotham Bar and Grill, Craft and Colicchio & Sons.

DeBragga is supplied by, among others, Niman Ranch, which says marketing is the only reason for the Creekstone insurgency. "We have better genetics and husbandry than any of our competitors," said John A. Tarpoff, a vice president at Niman, which has offices in Denver.

Niman Ranch — appearing on the menus of the River Café, Mercer Kitchen and Il Buco — says the grass-and-corn-fed Black Angus cattle for its "natural" line derive from some 70 ranches across the country supplying 30 feed-yard operations. Year-round, Mr. Tarpoff said, the percentage of Niman's beef graded as prime is higher than that of Creekstone and other high-end producers. But Mr. Tarpoff said its "natural" output is a fourth of Creekstone's. Niman contracts its meatpacking to a Swift & Company plant in Hyrum, Utah.

Creekstone's \$185 million, 450,000-square-foot packing plant was built a decade ago and is one of the most advanced slaughterhouses in the country. Cattle enter temperature-controlled pens suffused in low, even light. There are no distractions like white-garbed workers. "Cattle balk at color contrasts, reflections, shadows," said Temple Grandin, the slaughterhouse consultant who designed that and other features of the facility.

Her goal was to reduce stress and

fear in the animals, as some studies have suggested that they harm the quality of meat and are factors in producing so-called dark cutters, cattle whose meat appears brownish or blackish and may be sticky to the touch.

Cattle amble to their doom along serpentine paths that do not present alarming sharp angles. An air-circulation system prevents the animals from smelling either blood "or fear," Dr. Grandin said.

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Steak aficionados who prefer not to take responsibility for their taste buds might skip the rest of this paragraph. Dr. Grandin's conveyor-belt system lifts the live cattle up to the "knock room." There, a pneumatic bolt gun "kills them instantly," she said, putting a five-inch-long retractable bolt into the head. "They walk up and then, bang, it's done," she said.

In the plant on a recent morning, a vast beehive of 700 nonunion workers moved purposefully through the sweetly acrid abattoir tang of the plant amid the din of slaughterhouse machinery. Wielding their sharpening steels, butchers took glittering knives to some 900 carcasses swaying solemnly on computerized trolleys, riding rail after rail to their disassembly. In its advertising, Creekstone trumpets its slow and careful "line speed," processing 150 cattle an hour, about half the industry average.

The factory breaks down 1,000 head daily to produce some five million pounds of beef weekly, all tested for E. coli and salmonella before shipping. The plant utilizes "everything but the moo," Mr. Meyer said. Even cattle eyeballs are packed in dry ice to be hurried to a pharmaceutical company in Texas for use in medical research.

But much of the company's fate hangs on one crucial prime cut. Each carcass is opened at the 12th rib, exposing the rib-eye and revealing the marbling of the muscle.

A grader from the United States Department of Agriculture, who declined to be interviewed, examined carcasses. He was shadowed by Trace Nuckles, a Creekstone beef evaluator. Sometimes,

they had words. "We talk about some of them a bit," Mr. Nuckles said, smiling, of their adversarial dance.

The quality of marbling, in steak after steak, has bewitched chefs who buy Creekstone. Mr. Nasr, of Minetta Tavern, said he highly prized the consistency — minimal varying degrees of tenderness, marbling and flavor.

Some standardbearers of the sustainable-meat movement, like Joshua Applestone of Fleisher's Grass-Fed and Organic Meats, a butcher in Kingston, N.Y., sniff at Creekstone's boxed "factory meat." Pasture-fed animals bought from local farms are "healthier for customers and better for the animals, the small farmers and the small slaughterhouses," Mr. Applestone said.

But Mr. White, the chef at Marea, said there is a quality-control difference between Creekstone and the giant processors with dozens of plants and thousands of farm-and-feedlot subcontractors. In an industry that processes more than 600,000 head of cattle weekly, Creekstone accounts for less than 1 percent with its 5,000 head a week.

And even for a relatively tiny player like Creekstone, beef production is capital-intensive, Mr. Meyer, the cattle procurement officer, said. "We spend \$1 million a day just to purchase cattle."

Whatever the processors' size, the economics of beef are unforgiving. It costs a rancher more to raise cattle humanely. Each Angus steer or heifer can cost Creekstone \$1,100, and it even costs the company \$150 for a first look at ranchers' cattle. Those costs, plus profits for LaFrieda and for restaurants, are passed on to customers, who now insist on down-economy affordability even in high-end dining rooms. After all is said and done, Creekstone makes a profit of \$10 to \$40 a head.

Demand for its product has given Creekstone single-digit growth in a contracting economy, with \$370 million in revenues in 2009. Dennis Buhlke, Creekstone's president, predicts 7.5 percent growth in 2010.

Lately, Mr. Pastore, of LaFrieda, said that he cannot keep up with the demand for Creekstone rib steaks, porterhouse and other so-called middle meats. "That is the ice cream of the animal," he said.

And new competitors ceaselessly try to turn the heads of top chefs. Bill Niman, who in 2007 parted from the company he founded, Niman Ranch, now owns BN Ranch in Bolinas, Calif., with his wife, Nicolette. The ranch will offer its first aristocratic natural beef from 3-year-old grass-fed cattle this August in a restricted release that will be, as Mr. Niman put it, "like the arrival of the Beaujolais nouveau."