



Growing to Standard RETAILER TIPS

June 2018



What is "Growing to Standard"?

"Growing to standard" in the context of the meat industry means a series of on-farm production practices that include land use practices, genetics, herd health practices and feeding methods that produce a quality and consistent finished animal at processing. For a successful market, meats carried must be consistent in quality and cut.

As a retail business, following a criteria of guidelines creates consistency and a uniform product as you build your meat market value and customer assurance. When marketing meat we need to begin with the result, a satisfied customer with confidence in your products.

In addition to your shop standard, it is imperative that your meat producers meet your standard and that they strive to produce a high-quality product as this directly impacts your business success. It is equally important that you, the retailer, know your producers and how they operate. Become totally familiar with each species and carcass breakdown. Use meat products that have a good reputation, a farm with credibility will bring your shop strength. Use a butcher and/or processor(s) with an equally strong reputation for quality skill and workmanship. The best laid plans with the best animals can dissipate on the cut floor. This relationship is equally vital to the producer!

Consistency and Quality

Consistency of meat products begins with consistency on the farm. Production planning and building relationships with your meat producers is essential. Retailing sales are dependent on who walks through the door, there is no guarantee how the day will go. By having a consistent product line, sales options increase. Businesses like restaurants must have a consistent product to keep their customers returning for what they expect, a retail shop is exactly the same. Dependability is key to retailing and all sales. A consistent product line assures you, the retailer, that your case will be consistent with product for your customers. If a meat producer is a seasonal producer, stockpiling frozen product ahead of time will hold you in the slack months for continued sales.

Consistency in the shop builds consistency on the farm. Work on this with your producers and know what is attainable or not. Reliable and consistent texture, taste and quality is imperative to success while building consumer confidence and assurance.



Swift Level Fine Meats product, Lewisburg WV

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Economic benefits

If product is popular, sales will increase, placing more demand on the producer and the shop owner to keep product supplied. More sales more revenue! Poor quality meat and poorly cut meat will challenge business success. Absolutely, consumers looking for locally sourced meats generally care about all impacts. Using and implementing standards has direct impact on marketing. Quality assurance builds confidence. Standards uphold that concept. A confident customer will return.



Credit: Swift Level Fine Meats

Treatment of animals

Treatment of animals has a direct effect on meat quality. Stressed conditions and trauma interpreted through the meat as adrenaline production lowers quality. Land use and feedlot practices impact the animal. As a retailer, knowing the farms, land and herd practices is the starting point when beginning the relationship with the producer.

A content, non stressed animal produces a different carcass than highly stressed. There is a concept that slaughter is the stress point, it is, yet if the animal has lived a life of stress, of any sort, it will have definite impact on the meat. Consistent care and management with intended outcomes provides an environment of safety and support, which most domestic creatures respond to. With a followed standard, daily management brings more producer awareness to the overall project and the animals. Less stress can certainly contribute to consistent weight gain and a well toned carcass.

Environmental benefit

This is the first step in the process, without healthy soils, forages, water and conservation measures, developing healthy animals for meat will be a costly challenge. The relationship and care of the land is synonymous with good husbandry. The care of the land and its health are contiguous in nature. Best practices create healthy environments and animals. Standards often include land use management as poorly treated land cannot sustain healthy animals. The incentive to improve soil, forage and water quality provides direct outcomes that impact the entire farm.

Livestock value-chain and lifespan

All animal species have a different lifespan to a finished product. Hogs and Lambs are under a year from conception to the plate. Beef are generally 1 1/2 to 3 years depending on genetics and how they are fed. Farm practices impact the outcome of the meat animal and it is important for a retailer to understand the impact of the production methods used:

Methods to learn about that apply to beef, pork, lamb, include:

- Choice of all grass/pasture finished
- Partially grain fed on pasture
- Completely grain fed in enclosed areas

How can I use standards in my retail business?

Explore our suggested resources and as your business grows define what best fits your model. Visit your producing farms. There are meat producers who will not be a fit for a standard of quality. Quality Assurance is necessary in the marketing of product. Our emerging local meat consumers want to know everything about the meat they are purchasing. An informed and monitored meat producer background assures confidence and assurance in wholesale and retail markets that a meat product has dependable quality and consistency necessary for repeat consumer sales.

Also keep in mind that with livestock, you need to think a couple of years out and develop a multitude of sales options to cover if one sales stream weakens.

Steps:

Look at farming and raising animals for niche meat as an art form. Most niche meat producers care very much for this life they have chosen. They care for their animals. I suggest beginning with a easy to follow standard for starters and build from there. Know what practices you support and do not. Know what practices your customers expect in your shop. That alone will dictate the quality of direction your business will go in.

1. Work with someone knowledgeable on land and animal practices to understand what you are looking at and looking for if this is unfamiliar to you.
2. Work with someone knowledgeable with meat retail experience to understand where to set your initial goals and have a good business plan in hand.
3. Know your meat producers and begin with the one who is well established with quality and a customer base.
4. Ask your farmers if they are using any production standards, if not, ask if they would consider doing so to provide your shop with their meat. If not, consider why they are not willing and always appreciate everyone's time. Especially on the farm.
5. Your producers will dictate to an extent what meat supply you have in the first stages, this is a new relationship for everyone, and it will take time to build.
6. Every processor cuts meat differently, if your shop is not initially cutting meats yet selling inspected meats, having producers of same species use the same processor can favorably impact your business. Your relationship with this processor is vital. Know your processor and develop the same relationship with them that you have with your producers. They are also part of your standard. The best animal can lose all value on the cut floor, an experienced butcher is a vital part of the process and is most pivotal, not to ever be overlooked or minimized.
7. Know your initial customers, quality is necessary for success.

Things to consider:

- Know your producers, work with personalities that build strong relationships
- Production practices can be very personal, observe, learn and hold comments for on farm visits
- Consider and acknowledge that production requires capital, feed, fencing, water development and time for starters.
- Folks may not know where to look for better practices, guide them to sources that can best inform them on methods that succeed.
- Realize the value in distinct genetics and species from farm to farm, if one is superior, explore the ability to produce more animals.

Resources

National resources:

- American Grassfed Association
- Animal Welfare Approved
- Niche Meat Processors Network
- First Hand Foods
- White Oak Pastures
- NC Choices Carolina Meat Conference
- American Grazing Lands, Jim Gerrish
- Savory Institute
- Organic Valley
- Ray Archuleta - Soil Evangelist
- Vermont Packinghouse
- Porter Road
- Kari Underly - Butcher

Local Resources:

- WVU Small Farm Extension Calf Pooling
- Organic Valley
- Swift Level Fine Meats

Examples of cooperative grown to standard organizations:

- Organic Valley
- First Hand Foods
- Adirondack Grazers
- North Cascades Meat
- Vermont Packinghouse
- Porter Road



Swift Level Fine Meats, Lewisburg WV.