



EDITORIAL BACKGROUNDER

Consuming Red Meat as Part of a Healthy Lifestyle? One Woman's Quest to "Keep Beef on the Menu" is a Natural Success

"The quality of our lives can't be separated from the quality of our food."

Laura's Lean Beef, North America's leading lean, natural beef company, began as one woman's quest to eat healthier food and save the family farm.

Started in 1985 by Laura Freeman, a seventh generation Kentucky cattle farmer, Laura's Lean Beef is today a successful national retail brand with a product line that addresses the needs of health and diet-conscious consumers.

All of the company's products are lower fat alternatives to conventionally produced beef. Laura's Lean Beef raises cattle breeds like Limousin and Charolais that produce beef that is naturally lower in fat than beef from breeds such as Angus. The cattle are humanely raised, without growth hormones or antibiotics, and fed with a vegetarian diet of grasses and grains. Plus, the sustainable farming techniques emphasized by the company yield exceptionally lean beef.

Product offerings include a complete selection of fresh cuts of beef, ground beef, frozen patties, and three award-winning, fully-cooked entrees: Shredded Beef in Barbecue Sauce, Beef Pot Roast au Jus, and Meatloaf with Tomato Sauce.

Emerging trends in diet and health help fuel the company's growth. Laura's Lean Beef is seen as part of an answer to the nation's obesity crisis and the increasing demand for naturally-produced foods.

When Laura took over the family farm in the 1980's, many Americans were giving up red meat. As the relationship between health and food was becoming more closely scrutinized, beef developed a reputation for high total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. Fish and chicken became the prescribed proteins for many people who were working with doctors and dietitians to lose weight and live healthier. She believed that people still wanted to eat the beef they loved if only it could fit into a healthy lifestyle.

According to the FreshLook Marketing Group, the shift towards lean beef that is better for you is occurring. Between 2004 and 2007, consumers purchased 85 million pounds more of lean ground beef in grocery stores.

Laura's Lean Beef has been awarded the Good Housekeeping Seal and five of its products have been certified by the American Heart Association (AHA). The AHA's heart-check mark identifies products that meet the association's criteria for saturated fat and cholesterol. The GH Seal and AHA's heart-check mark are among the most trusted consumer icons.

The company's greatest achievement in growing the business has been its transition from niche market to mainstream without sacrificing the fundamental belief that sustainable farming practices produce healthier food and a healthier environment.

Today, Laura's Lean Beef is a collaboration of over 750 family farmers who raise beef according to strict requirements regarding feed and herd management. Products are sold in over 7,000 grocery stores in 47 states.

Future plans include developing additional convenience items that combine the brand's lean, natural attributes with minimal packaging materials to preserve the company's longstanding tradition of sustainable practices.

Natural Growth

About 50 “lean and light” beef companies were founded in the United States in the 1980s to meet the growing demand for low fat beef. Today, Laura’s Lean Beef is the only major operation remaining.

The company credits its “all-natural” approach to its success. Instead of artificially creating beef that was lower in fat by adding water and salt or even seaweed and other fillers, they experimented with gourmet cattle breeds and looked at feeding practices to produce beef that was naturally leaner.

Laura’s Lean Beef also became involved in the bigger issue of sustainable farming versus industrial cattle-raising methods. As a family farmer, it bothered Laura to see agriculture moving to bigger and bigger industrial farm operations. She became concerned about the widespread use of antibiotics and growth hormones. The more she studied the subject, the more she was convinced that natural farming methods, not chemicals, were the best way to farm. Today, this approach is called sustainable agriculture, and it is a movement that’s rapidly gaining support, not just in America, but all over the world.

Today, Laura Freeman remains a consultant and cattle producer for the company while Bill Rupp fills the role of President and CEO. Laura’s Lean Beef has a staff of about 90, including several regional cattle buyers who oversee a network of farms stretching from South Carolina to Idaho. Farmers who produce cattle for Laura’s sign a legal contract agreeing to adhere to the company’s requirements regarding feed and herd management. No growth hormones, antibiotics, animal tissue or by-products are allowed in the feeding program. The company tests the feed for pesticides and has strict standards for humane treatment.

A Future Based on Traditional Values

“Although the company has grown larger and more sophisticated, its priority is to remain true to its original values,” says Chris Anderson, director of marketing and customer service. “The family farm is at the heart of its operation. We realize that it’s more expensive for farmers to produce cattle to our specifications, so we pay a healthy premium over market price.”

“Quality, not quantity, is the key to economic survival for America’s family farms,” adds Anderson. “The fact is that Laura’s Lean Beef owes much of its success to people who have let their grocers know they want beef raised without growth hormones, antibiotics, fillers or additives and have requested our beef by name. Our customers and our company share a commitment to sustainable family farms, healthy foods, and a healthier future.”

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