

BRANDING THE BELTED BREED

By Libby Williams



Today, some pork at meat counters is no longer just “pork.” Branding protein products adds value to the plain commodity meat U.S. consumers once cooked for their families, and provides a premium product for the discerning customer. Certified Angus Beef® (CAB)

made history by taking the name “Angus” to a whole new level.

Now, two companies are seeking to do the same thing in the pork industry, using none other than the belted breed.



Following the success of breed-specific, value-added marketing in the beef industry, the pork sector has stepped up to the plate over the past decade, mostly with Berkshire and Duroc products. But two companies marketing Hampshire pork are gaining momentum, and they've teamed up with the National Swine Registry (NSR). American Homestead Natural Meats and Coleman Natural Meats are promoting endorsed breed-branded pork, and adding value in a whole new way to the black and whites.

NSR negotiates the niche

In 2006, Coleman Natural Meats approached the National Swine Registry with a new venture that would satisfy a niche need. Modeling Angus beef, Coleman Natural Meats hoped to create a branded pork line using the Hampshire breed.

Because the National Swine Reg-

program during his tenure there. He realized that beyond just breed recognition, select consumers were demanding additional product guarantees.

"You have consumers that either shop with their eyes or they shop with their conscience. There is a segment of them that see the quality of the product, and say, 'Okay, that looks good, I want that,'" McLaughlin says.

"Then there is a bigger sector that say, 'These animals were humanely raised, they were humanely harvested, I know where this meat comes from,' and they feel good about what they are feeding themselves or their families," he adds.

Since working for Coleman Natural, McLaughlin has branched out and started his own company called American Homestead Natural Meats to target those who shop with both their conscience and their eyes. In 2008, American Homestead began selling natural Hampshire

products that are delivering the promise of naturally raised, high-quality meat to consumers. But why Hampshire?

In 2006, when McLaughlin helped launch Coleman Natural Hampshire Pork as the first branded Hampshire pork line combining breed-specific animals, natural raising practices and meat quality, he says he did it because he knew the breed.

"I had a passion for Hampshires and I understood the meat business," McLaughlin says.

Later, when he started his own company, American Homestead, he followed that same vision – and same breed.

When selecting a hog breed to use on a branded product based on phenotype and meat quality, McLaughlin says the seven common breeds quickly narrowed themselves down to three, based on traditional breed characteristics: Berkshire, Duroc and Hampshire.

"And (using Hampshire) is just another way that retailers or food service companies can separate themselves from their competition."

— Bart Vittori

istry owns the rights to the name "Hampshire," under contract Coleman Natural Foods agreed to pay royalties for every pound of pork it sold under the Hampshire brand. In return, the NSR agreed to allow the company to print "Hampshire" on their labels, and furthermore, extended its services in helping Coleman Natural find the right genetics to channel into their program.

Through this agreement, Coleman Natural Foods was able to create a recognizable product that appeals to many consumer groups, while combining the Hampshire brand with an all-natural promise.

Dee McLaughlin of Vernon, Texas, now chief operating officer for American Homestead Natural meats, was formerly employed with Coleman Natural and helped launch its branded

pork under a similar agreement as Coleman Natural signed with the NSR for use of the "Hampshire" name.

Bart Vittori, vice president and general manager of Coleman Natural's pork division, joined Coleman Natural upon McLaughlin's resignation. He says marketing Hampshire pork through their all-natural program has versatile benefits.

"If you look at it from a pure eating experience, Coleman's Hampshire brand provides great taste and adds to any recipe," Vittori says. "And (using Hampshire) is just another way that retailers or food service companies can separate themselves from their competition."

Why Hampshire?

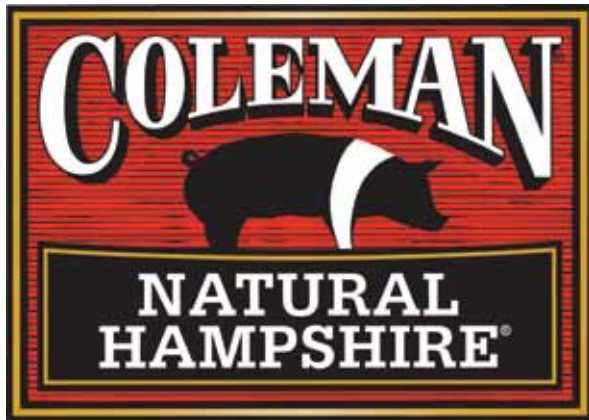
With the NSR's approval, both American Homestead and Coleman Natural are marketing Hampshire pork

There were already a multitude of Berkshire programs, and he believed that Berkshire's genetic pool wasn't large enough to combine large loin eyes with meat quality. At the time, the Duroc Board of Directors only allowed Duroc breeders to market and sell Duroc pork, and McLaughlin wasn't one of those breeders.

"That pretty much left Hamp to default, outside of my passion for Hampshires and the fact that I knew some breeders," McLaughlin says.

To model the success of the Angus beef marketing program, McLaughlin then called on the experts.

"When I first started the Hampshire deal, I called some of my buddies at CAB and said, 'This is what we want to do, pick it apart.'" McLaughlin says. "We put our noses down and figured out how



Coleman Natural Hampshire proudly claims they are the “first exclusive pedigreed pork program ever, combining natural raising practices and prime quality.” Their website touts their richly marbled and naturally juicy Hampshire pork. American Homestead Natural Pork states they are a network of 35 traditional, full-time family hog farms committed to animal welfare and responsible farming methods. They emphasize the superior taste, tenderness and eating experience of their pork products.

to get the best meat quality we could get, and we went to a genotypic program.”

Although Vittori wasn't with Coleman Natural when the Hampshire line originated, he understands the value of the Hampshire brand. Vittori says that branding their product with the Hampshire name helps their customers differentiate.

“Before I started, it was just Coleman Natural. Then it was, ‘We've got this Hampshire product that is very consistent and eats very well, let's go out and just market what we have that really nobody else our size has,’ he says. “For our Hampshire customers ... it is a selling distinction.”

genetics. Coleman Natural and American Homestead maintain these qualifications by requiring their producers' sows are percentage Hampshire, then making sure those sows are bred back to purebred, pedigreed Hampshire boars.

Babcock Genetics, Holmen, Wis., is Coleman Natural's genetics supplier, and provides Coleman Natural's swine producers with pedigreed Hampshire breeding stock. Those producers sell offspring to Coleman Natural to be used in their natural Hampshire pork line. Babcock Genetics operates an antibiotic-free closed herd with approximately 50 purebred Hampshire boars currently in its stud. NSR member

To be able to supply Coleman Natural's producers with the best Hampshire genetics and improve meat quality, Babcock ran a screening process on purebred Hampshires.

“A couple of things that were important to us were meat quality, growth rate and feed conversion,” Bierman says. “Then we went out and sampled females as well as sires to bring in a broad genetic base with the hopes of propagating those animals forward.”

With the help of the NSR, Babcock was able to find their ideal genetics at Cain Farms, provide those genetics to Coleman Natural's pork producers, and use the resulting pork in the Hampshire program.

Vittori says they can see a difference.

“The way we position it is controlled genetics. You aren't getting a hodge-podge [of genotypes],” Vittori says, which would lead to inconsistencies in carcass quality – a killer of any branded program. “These

(Hampshires) are consistent,” he adds. “It is just huge because the meat is the same week in and week out.”

American Homestead runs a similar program, using the NSR to help locate pedigreed Hampshire sires to use in their producers' breeding programs. American Homestead uses ultrasound on those sires to ensure satisfactory loin eye sizes and intramuscular fat scores.

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— Dee McLaughlin

Clear criterion

In comparison to the CAB brand development, Coleman Natural and American Homestead have both initiated programs that base their promise of Hampshire pork on genetics rather than phenotype.

The genetic program ensures that all pork going into both programs contains at least 51 percent pure Hampshire

Cain Farms of Chariton, Iowa, was a major contributor of the original Hampshires brought into their nucleus.

“We brought them (the Hampshires) into our nucleus herd using embryo transfer,” Chad Bierman, a geneticist with Babcock, says.

“We went out and sampled and asked questions of the bigger producers with some objectives in mind.”

One of the only factors working against Hampshire pork is the Rendement Napole or RN gene. This gene, seen most often in purebred Hampshires, reduces the meat's pH level and water-holding capacity, and thus reduces meat quality.

As per the contract with the NSR, Coleman Natural and American Homestead require parent stock used to derive pork products under the Hampshire label to be free of the RN gene. With RN free lines, meat quality in Hampshire pork continues to improve. But McLaughlin says he won't settle for pork that is just good enough.

"How do we improve the overall demand of high quality pork? One, we get more of it. And two, we've got to identify it," McLaughlin says. "We are continually trying to find ways to improve meat quality."

Upcoming opportunities

Natural Hampshire pork targets a niche market that is on the rise.

Not only is it appealing to those consumers who are shopping for specific criteria, but it is also becoming a recognizable breed and product.

When placed on a label, the striking black and white pattern of Hampshire hogs attracts the eye.

"Not every little pig is a cute little white pig like Hollywood likes to say it is," McLaughlin says.

Once consumer attention is captured, they realize the product's perks: naturally and humanely raised meat with large loin eyes and exceptional marbling.

Without the efforts of the NSR, branding pork with the Hampshire name wouldn't have been possible, and an NSR breed now has the potential to achieve the same success as the Angus campaign. Although they're competitors, American Homestead and Coleman Natural leadership have matching views of the NSR.

"Any time we've needed anything from them, any support, the response is immediate," Vittori says. "Any

time I need anything on the live-stock side, they are ready to help."

McLaughlin agrees.

"American Homestead is a big supporter of the NSR. They've been more than willing to assist us in whatever they can," he says. "Hopefully over time [natural Hampshire pork] will become a more important revenue source for the NSR because they own the name Hampshire."

DIGILINK



In the world of branded meat, understanding terminology can be tricky. To see the official USDA definition of a "natural" meat product, use the following link.



Use your smartphone to visit the USDA website or type in the web address below.

<http://goo.gl/hlfAF>

Company Guarantee

AMERICAN HOMESTEAD NATURAL HAMPSHIRE PORK *

- Never administered antibiotics
- Never administered growth promotants or added hormones
- 100% vegetarian fed
- Animals are not restricted in farrowing or gestation crates
- No preservatives
- Raised on sustainable Midwest family farms in a low-stress environment
- Emphasis on animal welfare
- No added nitrates or nitrites

COLEMAN NATURAL HAMPSHIRE PORK * *

- No Antibiotics Ever
- No Added Hormones
- No Preservatives
- 100% Vegetarian Fed
- Humanely Raised
- Sustainably Farmed
- Gluten Free
- Dairy Free
- Soy Free



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