



New Packaging Lines Help Family Meet Demand for Specialty Beef

Now, it's easier for the folks at Messinger Meats to keep health-conscious consumers supplied with lean, high-protein Piedmontese beef. Growing Forward 2 helped make it possible.

Cattle producers like to find a processor and retailer who'll give their lovingly raised beef the respect and market it deserves. Processor and retailers, meanwhile, aim to give their customers a taste experience that's truly unique.

When it all comes together, it's a beautiful thing...and that's what's happened over the last two years with Piedmontese beef in Red Deer, Calgary, and Edmonton.

Mercedes Messinger, who operates Messinger Meats with her husband Joe in Mirror, Alberta, explains how it all began.

"My husband did a roast of the Piedmontese beef one day," she recalls. "After that, I didn't want to eat anything else."

The beef came from Peony Farms near Lacombe, operated by Peter and Emma Den Oudsten, friends of the Messingers. What makes this beef so special? Messinger notes that the breed has a special double-muscling gene mutation that makes it extra tender. Piedmontese is also said to be higher in protein, and lower in fat and cholesterol. Only 1 percent of all cattle in North America, just 15,000 head, are Piedmontese. The Den Oudstens have the only purebred Piedmontese herd in Alberta.

Unique Beef Opens Up Markets

In 2014, working closely with the Den Oudsten family, Messinger Meats began to process and sell Piedmontese beef through Sinnott Independent Grocer in Red Deer. Very quickly, Messinger was seeing interest from an audience she hadn't expected.

"A lot of bodybuilders in Red Deer became my customers," she says. "They wanted the Piedmontese beef because it's lean and high protein, to help with their training."

As an Italian breed, Piedmontese beef was also a natural fit for the large Italian communities in Calgary and Edmonton. Messinger Meats then secured a coveted spot at the four Italian Centre Shops operated by the Spinelli family. This arrangement brought two other developments. The Messingers decided to close their own retail shop and focus on processing, and they needed to streamline that system, fast. Enter *Growing Forward 2*.

More Efficient, Food-Safe Packaging

At the Messinger Meats facility in Mirror, packaging had long been a bottleneck for the operation. Steaks were bagged by hand, then sealed with a vacuum packaging machine. It was difficult to find staff to do this work, so the family put in the hours needed to get their products to



market. Last year, they purchased two new packaging lines, with cost-sharing from the *Growing Forward 2* Agri-Processing Automation and Efficiency Program that's delivered by Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency Ltd. (ALMA). Packaging steaks went from a two-hour job to just 15 minutes.

"At some point you have to ask yourself, how many hands you have?" says Messinger. "This packaging equipment has been the perfect addition for us, and it's just the right size for the facility. It's faster, so it's good for food safety and our packaging looks beautiful."

Of course, there's more to Messinger Meats than Piedmontese beef. The company offers many different cuts of hormone-free bison, pork, farm elk, and a popular line of sausages as well. Still, their relationship with a great producer and a suitable retailer has made Piedmontese an important part of their business.

Says Mercedes Messinger: "We found the Piedmontese beef has very consistent quality and it has become very popular with people. For us, this is a much better way to sell meat."

Growing Forward 2 is a federal – provincial – territorial initiative.