

Farmers are First on the ‘Food Scene’*By Tracy Grondine*

Today, more than ever before, America’s consumers are speaking out about food. What they like. What they want. And how they want it produced. With this trend in mind, the American Farm Bureau Federation within the past year embarked upon what we call the ‘food scene.’

According to the Associated Press, “Americans are getting increasingly intimate with their food.” The preferences of these so-called foodies, who generally are more discriminating than other consumers, influence the food grown by America’s farmers and ranchers. It only makes sense that those who produce food stay on top of the latest restaurant, grocery and other foodie trends, as well as help influence them.

With this in mind, the American Farm Bureau created a monthly e-newsletter, *Foodie News*, which monitors and tracks food-related trends in today’s consumer-driven marketplace. It also reaches out to other voices in the food value chain to help producers better understand what drives the decisions made by the people who buy farm and ranch products. Decision makers who have contributed to *Foodie News* as guest columnists include, amongst others, representatives from Starbucks, Butterball and even a radio personality from American Public Media.

Aside from the regular guest column, other *Foodie News* staples include a ‘Food by the Numbers’ section that breaks down trends into, well, numbers and a segment that looks at cherry-picked articles from the nation’s top newspaper food sections.

To accompany the e-newsletter, AFBF recently created the Foodie News Blog, <http://www.fb.org/foodie>, which allows anyone on the Web to participate in and contribute to the foodie dialogue. Foodies don’t have to be rich or even particularly well-off financially. They just need to be aficionados of food and drink. More and more mainstream grocers are catering to foodies by adding artisanal cheeses, sushi bars and organic sections to their stores. Pizza chains have started touting “natural and organic” ingredients. Even fast food restaurants are staking a claim with coffee bars and gourmet sandwiches.

Foodies are laying the groundwork for our consumer-driven marketplace. They want to know where their food comes from, how it’s prepared and who prepares it. This “farm-to-table cuisine” mentality tops the trends we can expect to hear more about in 2009.

Meeting frugal foodie demands during this economic downturn will also continue to be a trend in restaurants and grocery stores, as well as grocers and food companies going high-tech with in-store food traceability and hand-held electronic devices that link shopping lists to a store’s layout.

Also be on the watch for the growing trend of cooking clubs, cooking shows and celebrity chefs, and even electronic cooking games. Look for a renewed focus on fresh, organic and natural ingredients—especially in school cafeterias—as well as urban farming and a heightened localized movement. Also, food is expected to take center stage under the new Obama administration where the focus on quality and health will be big.

Farmers and ranchers have a major stake in the food scene. Aside from monitoring current fads, we can help influence future foodie trends by maintaining open dialogue with other stakeholders, as well as being forward thinking.

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During the course of 15 days, more than 2,200 of their cattle and calves were gathered and hauled to a livestock auction market where they were fed, watered, vaccinated and treated for storm-related injury when necessary. Dozens of people worked 18-hour to 20-hour days to complete the mission.

The calves and older cows were sold on day 11 after the storm. The younger cows were sorted into lots of like type, age, and pregnancy status and sold on day 15. The sales went well, and those two families have more proceeds with which to start over than they would have otherwise, had the cows been sold strictly for processing.

Those two Chambers County ranchers, along with hundreds of their fellow crop and livestock producers, now face months of haggling with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Agriculture Department over disaster relief. They're also dealing with insurance companies and locating contractors to rebuild fences, corrals and homes.

Truth be told, they face a road more challenging than most of us could even begin to contemplate.

But these are resilient people with faith in themselves and their way of life that comes from the Almighty. They deserve our good wishes and prayers as they rebuild entire herds, their homes and their very lives. They have endured much thus far; and they will endure much more as they continue to pick up the pieces and rebound from the ire of Hurricane Ike.

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