

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand, Bryan Schaaf. Joining me in studio, meat scientist, Diana Clark. How are you doing?

Diana Clark:

Doing great.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Diana, we are talking this week about a gentleman who in the, really we'll say in the meat science, but really in the greater food world, we lost sadly, Dr. Bob VanStavern, passed away at the age of 91 years old recently. He's a name that is not necessarily a household name in the general food population, but you have a story. He was a meat scientist. You got to get on an elevator with him one time and it was kind of your Elvis moment wasn't it?

Diana Clark:

Oh, it was. It was actually for our Billion Pound Bash. We were going up to the top floor for it and I stepped in the elevator and I saw him and I just went, "Ah." I had a little gasp for a second. Dr. Phil Bass was with me and he said, "Would you like to meet him?" I said, "Yes." So we actually did meet and have a little bit of a conversation, and I thanked him for all the work that he did, too. I felt pretty cool. It's almost like full circle of passing it down.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's amazing. That's amazing, right? You may be listening and wondering, "All right, what did this guy do that is holy cow?" That kind of moment. Dr. Bob VanStavern is the gentlemen who set the specs, the scientific specs, that ultimately created Certified Angus Beef. Sometimes here internally, we become very focused on Certified Angus Beef, but because it was the oldest, it was the first brand of beef program that existed. Before that, beef was commodity and beef wasn't necessarily sorted on eating merits other than marbling score. But even that was a little suspect. USDA had dropped the overall grading scale. They were allowing lower quality cuts into the choice grade than had before because there was an overall lacking of marbled beef in the marketplace. Dr. Bob VanStavern was the gentleman, the meat scientist, at Ohio State. I should say the Ohio State.

Diana Clark:

Yeah. We're in the state of Ohio.

Bryan Schaaf:

I don't prescribe to that, but I know I would catch flack if I didn't include the in that as well.

Diana Clark:

Pause.

Bryan Schaaf:

He was the one whose legend would have it, when Mick Colvin, the founder of Certified Angus Beef, asked him about it, he literally pulled out a piece of paper that he'd had written in his desk drawer at

Ohio State and said, "Well, if I was going to do a beef program and make sure that it was consistently tasty, this is what I would do." And to this day, 41 years later, it still stands. From your perspective as a meat scientist, it's easy for us internally here, we're housed inside of Certified Angus Beef, but those specs, those had an impact on the entire beef community though, right?

Diana Clark:

Oh, yeah. It pushed off the focus on quality. At that time, when people were focusing on lean beef and he knew what good quality beef was. By knowing that, he had those standards written, which is just incredible to think about. Not only from a science standpoint that he went through to determine all of this, but also of his just nobleness and willingness to share is incredible, because Certified Angus Beef, when we were getting started, we didn't have funding that we could try to run these experiments and figure this out and work with the university. He was just there to help. I think that's what makes it even more incredible, that he was just that guy that said, "No, I know this is right, and this is what's going to be good, high quality beef, and I want it too, so I'm going to support you in that decision." I think that's really hard to find in most people today, and for the fact that he just went out to help us, it's pretty incredible.

Bryan Schaaf:

It's pretty wild. We're going to have an interview coming up here shortly with actually our president, Dr. John Stika, a meat scientist in his own right. It seems like we've got meat scientists coming out of the weeds here in this building. I am not one of them. One of the specs that Dr. Bob prescribed to was drawing the line on the marbling score. If you're familiar with marbling, of course that's the intramuscular fat. Right? Of course, meat science 101, the more marbling a cut of meat has the better it's going to taste, the better it's going to eat. That's not the only spec that he had, but it certainly seems to be the most important. Can you talk a little bit about that? As somebody who plays in this arena every day, on the marbling scale, a modest or a higher marbling score. That would be the very top third of choice, the very top tier of choice going up into prime. He drew the line there. He didn't allow anything in below it because he knew scientifically the human palette can tell a difference in, say, above this line tastes differently than what's below the line, right?

Diana Clark:

Yeah. He had run these blind taste panels with consumers. Essentially, you give them two samples of one and one of the other, and it's called the triangle test. You say, "Tell me which one's different," to see if they can actually distinguish a difference between them. This was done in the '70s. Back then, when you look at that select to your low choice, could not distinguish the difference. Then, they compared the low choice to your average choice for the modest amount of marbling, and that's where consumers actually will notice a difference between those two. That was in the '70s, but they still have run these taste panels today. K-State has done a panel not too long ago, I think about two or three years ago, and the exact same results. There's just something with that amount of fat that really just makes it overall more palatable and people desire it and crave it more. They actually notice a difference, which is really cool to see. We kind of started that movement and you just see it just continuing to grow. People are wanting more of that beefy flavor in their diet.

Bryan Schaaf:

Amen.

Diana Clark:

Yeah.

Bryan Schaaf:

Amen. We are going to turn the page here and be back with an interview with Dr. John Stika, meat scientist and president of Certified Angus Beef, and a gentlemen who knew Dr. Bob VanStavern to a pretty deep level. He's been at Certified Angus Beef for more than 20 years, and they had a lot of experiences over the years, plus of course his meat science background also played a role. We are going to be back in a few minutes if you wouldn't mind sticking around and keep listening here on the Meat Speak podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand.

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak podcast, actually in the middle of a Florida monsoon. It's tropical as they come. We had an opportunity to sit down with the gentleman who is actually the president of Certified Angus Beef. We wanted to talk specifically about the passing of an individual who pretty much anybody in the meat industry, maybe you don't know who he is or you didn't experience him, but you've certainly experienced his work. We're talking about the passing of Dr. Bob VanStavern. Joining us here is president of Certified Angus Beef. We talk a lot about meat scientists on this podcast. A meat scientist in his own right, in addition to the many other things that he does on behalf of beef, Dr. John Stika. Sir, we appreciate you joining us here on the podcast.

John Stika:

Oh, pleasure's mine.

Bryan Schaaf:

It's fantastic. As somebody who, you have your PhD in meat science, K-State all the way? Kansas State?

John Stika:

No, University of Kentucky for my PhD. I'm a Wildcat all the way through, but Kansas State on my undergraduate and my master's and then PhD at University of Kentucky.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Wildcats either way.

John Stika:

Wildcats.

Bryan Schaaf:

Just purple or blue, right?

John Stika:

I had to change colors, but other than that, everything was pretty much status quo.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's good. You just have to dim the lights a little bit.

John Stika:

Just dim the lights a little bit. That's right.

Bryan Schaaf:

You look at all the work that obviously has to go into getting a doctorate or a PhD in meat science, and the years and the studies and the papers and everything. Certainly Dr. Bob VanStavern is somebody that his work and him personally, you would have crossed paths with in that journey. Can you talk about your early experiences with Dr. Bob?

John Stika:

By the time I was in graduate school and so forth, Dr. Bob had already retired from academia at the Ohio State University. I think one of the things about science is science lives on, science is a part of the literature from years gone by. A lot of the things that we know about marbling and about quality and so forth go back to the early years of meat science. Over time, you just add to that theory about how great-tasting beef or meat is brought about, but also during those years, the scientific community challenges the status quo. I think that's probably a bit of what we saw during Dr. Bob's era at the Ohio State University in meat science was he was an active meat scientist when the debate around marbling and the importance of taste and flavor to consumer demand was honestly at a bit of a height in people challenging that status quo.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. It almost seemed like it. For context, Dr. Bob VanStavern, as it means, not only to Certified Angus Beef, which Certified Angus Beef is relevant not only because this podcast happens to... Certified Angus Beef, it was the first. It was the original beef program that really started to sort cattle or sort sides of beef based on eating merits.

John Stika:

Yep. Yeah.

Bryan Schaaf:

The science behind what constituted that literally came out of Dr. Bob's desk. It was almost like he was sitting on these science specs for years just waiting for somebody to listen them.

John Stika:

There are three things that we at Certified Angus Beef believe the brand's success, that it rests upon, and that is quality product, the ability to work with quality people, and the ability to protect the integrity of a brand that's been established. Product people and integrity is the three-legged stool, so to speak, that this brand sits on. None more important than the other, but all three equally necessary. I think it's fair to say that the product specification or the product leg of that stool rests solidly within Dr. Bob. Take a person who is so impactful yet so humble about the role that they played in this brand success, I think his passing gives us reason to look back and really appreciate him for what he was a part of, and in all honesty, the fact that his idea towards quality has really changed an entire industry today.

John Stika:

I was doing a bit of an interview for a tribute to Dr. Bob earlier, and I equated Dr. Bob to he's the Christopher Columbus of meat science. When everybody was telling Christopher Columbus the world was flat, he said, "No, I don't believe so." I think, with Dr. Bob, when an entire industry was trying to pontificate that lower quality products was where beef demand was going to be built in the future, Dr. Bob was a bit of a Christopher Columbus saying, "I don't believe so, that I believe it's going to be rooted in quality, that it's going to be rooted in marbling." He really was a spokesman for quality before quality was cool.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah.

John Stika:

I think, as we look back today, the things that he advocated for seem almost commonplace today after 40 years of Certified Angus Beef in the marketplace, as a plethora of additional programs touting quality of coming to the marketplace. It's just very fitting that we look back at an individual that, while he wasn't the sole founder of the brand, with the Mick Colvins and the Fred Johnsons and the Herald Etlings and so forth, the Charles Canons of the industry in the world at the time. Without Dr. Bob, maybe the specifications look different than they did when it started. It's an amazing story about a person who believed in something and found somebody else who believed in something in Mick Colvin, and they got together and Dr. Bob basically pulled these specifications for quality out of his desk drawer, the way I understand the story, and told Mick that, "Hey, if you want to accomplish a consistent eating piece of beef and do that in a branded form through the handwritten specs on a piece of paper across the desk to Mick, and told him, "That's what I would do if I were you." And there it was. There it was born.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah, and 41 years later, those specs are pretty much unchanged. Actually have been dialed in a little bit to a certain extent.

John Stika:

Yeah, absolutely.

Bryan Schaaf:

One of the things that jumps out at me and it's one of the reasons that I really wanted to spend time on this is whether it's Certified Angus Beef, whether it's really any type of eating experience graded branded beef program that's out there, it all goes back to this. Before this, it was commodity beef. There was a USDA grading scale that, long story short, had just been relaxed based on the lower quality cattle coming into the marketplace, but really when you look at the greater landscape, everything, Certified Angus Beef and beyond goes back to Dr. Bob.

John Stika:

Yeah. Yeah, I think without Dr. Bob being a part of the establishment of the brand, the industry probably does look different. The industry, we already knew that prime was a good quality grade. There was prime, choice, good at the time, as opposed to select, but we had the grading system and we knew that eating quality improved as marbling went up, but I would tell you that this was during a time period

where the folks in academia and in the industry, it wasn't anybody in particular that had anything negative that they were trying to accomplish, we were sometimes misreading what the consumer was telling us. They were telling us less fat, less fat, less fat. I think, as an industry, we were looking back and saying that that means less marbling. Less marbling and as long as it's tender, it's fine. We forgot about flavor and juiciness.

John Stika:

I think Dr. Bob, his genius came in the fact that I think he was one at the time that was interpreting the consumer correctly. When they were saying less fat, that means less external fat. But let's not pull all the goodness out of the product. It still has to taste good for me to want to buy it. I think that's some of what he was a voice for, a bit of an anchor for an industry. To your very point, here we find ourselves today, that while beef demand was going down during that time period, Dr. Bob really had an idea that came along with that of Mick and Fred Johnson and Harold Etling and those founding fathers as well, that said, "Hey, if we want to secure a future for Angus, we've got to secure a future around marbling and quality." I think, today, to your very point, because of that solid opinion and a willingness to defend it, today we've got an entire industry that gets it, that gets it and we're in a much different spot, I think, with consumer demand and ultimately profitability at the cow/calf level, at every level to be perfectly honest, because a bit of Dr. Bob's foresight.

Bryan Schaaf:

One of the things, as we look at some of those specs, is the idea of the marbling score, the modest or higher. As I have been able to go through this meat science, unofficial schooling over the years.

John Stika:

Your science type.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yes, right. I'm science-ish.

John Stika:

Your science type. Maybe not scientist, but science type. I get it.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. It wasn't a line that was just arbitrarily drawn, and it's why do we draw the line at this marbling score and, as our old meat scientist, Dr. Phil Bass would always point out, that was where Dr. Bob knew is where the human palette can pick up a difference between this tastes better than this, and that's why that line is drawn there. Are those things that, in your studies and in your work, were those things that you guys would stress to academia, or was it just common knowledge in those days?

John Stika:

I wouldn't tell you it was common knowledge, but I would tell you that when I was a student that we didn't talk a lot about premium choice, and the reality is the reason we didn't, keep in mind, that there wasn't a price signal to, say, premium choice was better than low choice. I think in my studies as an undergraduate and graduate students, that's where an industry drew lines. I think it was logical. I don't think anybody necessarily in the science community had it wrong. It's just sometimes when you forget

about the original data, and it's interesting, here we find ourselves today reconfirming the very data that Dr. Bob based those specifications on, that, yes, there is a eating quality difference at modest zero, and the data and the consumer taste panel information confirms that. But in between there, I think the scientists maybe were looking at, okay, we've got this big pressure for reduced fat in the diet, we've got this big pressure for efficiency and production, and even while the consumer says that this product is better, the economics are saying that we need to go this direction over here.

John Stika:

I think it was more of a function of being able to understand not which data was accurate, I think probably they both were accurate, but where are we going to go? What's the unintended consequence of taking this approach? I think that's what we found ourselves as an industry. We followed good economic data that said an industry has got to give attention to this fat issue. We didn't give enough attention to what's the unintended consequence. The unintended consequence was, as we pursued that, that lower quality product, the consumer walked away from our product. Consumer said one thing and maybe meant another.

John Stika:

I think that's the genius again in what Dr. Bob said. I think he, as well as Mick Colvin, as well as Fred Johnson, Harold Etling, other Angus breeders saw the unintended consequence would be, was that we could do this and we're going to lose beef demand and we're going to lose the viability of our breed as well. Dr. Bob wasn't an Angus breeder by any means, but he had a thought process based on science that aligned with what the Angus breed needed at that time, and that's why I think he's so important to not just the success of this brand, but the success of the breed. To your point, I think a lot of Angus breeders don't know Dr. Bob, probably maybe have heard of him if they're a generation older, but to your point earlier, this is a case where we don't know how much we should appreciate Dr. Bob for what he did at the time.

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand, Bryan Schaaf, joined back in studio in the basement of Certified Angus Beef in Wooster, Ohio, by meat scientist, Diana Clark. How you doing?

Diana Clark:

Doing good.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. One of the things we talk about, Dr. Bob VanStavern. Internally, we reference him as the father of the specs. Right?

Diana Clark:

Yeah.

Bryan Schaaf:

Certified Angus Beef exists because of the 10 eating specs that all beef has to meet to get the logo on it, and what that is essentially is it's a visual guarantee that, if you buy this, it's going to be good. Right?

Diana Clark:

It's going to be good. Yeah.

Bryan Schaaf:

He set those specs in 1978. Actually, he set them before that. They officially went into play in 1978. But there was one spec that dealt with yield grade. It's probably the only thing that we've really messed with, and we didn't mess with it to open up more supply, we actually took it to drill down a little deeper to get an even more consistent end point. Can you talk about going from yield grade to what we do now?

Diana Clark:

Yeah. Before, when Dr. Bob VanStavern had wrote the specifications, we had yield grade in play, and yield grade encompasses your hot carcass weight, your rib eye area, your back fat thickness, and then overall your KPH fat, which is your kidney, heart, and pelvic fat. He had used a specific yield grade to make sure that it was falling into specification. The only downside with that is, if you use a yield grade of a 4.0, I can have a beef animal that has a lot of fat on there, over an inch, but also has a really large eye, and it could still fall into that yield grade three category, which would have been acceptable, but now we have more of that variety in the program. Actually, our team here had worked on just trying to make things a bit more consistent.

Diana Clark:

Clint Walenciak, he's still on staff here as a director of packing. He kind of spearheaded that, and he, "Well, why don't we just say, hey, let's make it a 10 to 16 square inch rib eye and less than an inch of fat?" Now we're just taking parameters of that yield grade and being way more specific. We also have a hot carcass weight specification as well. We kind of just pulled apart that specification, but like you said, we made it more specific, so that way you can get a more consistent product throughout. It's incredible, just by picking it apart just a little bit, how much further it's taken the brand.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. The specs in general, even that spec, there are a lot of programs, a lot of other brands based on similar specs to what Dr. Bob rolled out, right down to that. I guess, as you look at the greater beef industry, what kind of testament is that, to not only have the folks here in this building, obviously big believers in it? But really this has been pretty widely accepted everywhere.

Diana Clark:

Oh, yeah.

Bryan Schaaf:

I haven't heard of anybody who's come back and said, "No, this is wrong."

Diana Clark:

I know. I think it's neat to see how we started in the '70s, and then the next brand of beef program didn't come about until the '90s, and it was from a packing partner that sold our brand. I think it was more of like, "Oh, wow, this is actually going to work. Okay, yeah, that makes sense." Yes, there's science behind all of this, and I think that's the neatest part for me as a meat scientist is that it is a

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science-based specifications that runs this program. I am not a good liar. I jokingly say that to a lot of salespeople, but I am not a good liar, so I could not just, "Hey, yeah, I know it's going to be good." No, it definitely is going to be good. There is no doubt in my mind that this isn't going to be a great piece of meat. There's no way that it's going to be bad.

Diana Clark:

It's really cool to see that and to see, I guess, the work, not only that Dr. Bob put into it, but also the work that Certified Angus Beef continues to put into it. We want to make sure we have the best beef out there, so every day we have people that wake up and just challenge ourselves of how we can improve, how can we make it better? Dr. Bob set the foundation for us to really point us in the best direction that we could be running, and we just want to make sure that we continue to do him service by improving as we go along.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. Well said. Meat scientist, Diana Clark, thank you for actually taking time out of the meat lab to join us down here in the studio at Certified Angus Beef. Before we roll, I'm going to raise my coffee cup and salute Dr. Bob VanStavern.

Diana Clark:

Yes.

Bryan Schaaf:

A life well-lived. Thank you for everything that you've done for the meat industry, certainly for us. Sir, we salute you. If this is your first time tuning into the Meat Speak podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand, you can catch us across every major podcasting platform, Google, Spotify, Apple, or simply by visiting CertifiedAngusBeef.com/podcast.