

National Industry Review

A Rural Press Special Feature

by JON CONDON

ONE of Australia's internationally-known celebrity chefs has made a serious commitment to red meat with the launch of two new up-market steakhouse dining ventures, both called Rockpool Bar and Grill, in Sydney and Melbourne.

Neil Perry regularly features as one of Australia's most highly acclaimed chefs for his original Rockpool seafood restaurant in Sydney. He has his own cable TV show on the Lifestyle channel and is feted for his innovative, modern way with food.

Speaking during a recent industry gathering in Brisbane, Mr Perry said he believed there was a growing



Rockpool's Neil Perry, pictured holding a sample of Cape Grim Natural branded beef, is passionate about prospects for emerging beef categories in the food service industry.

opportunity for more 'mature' beef from older animals in the upper end of the food service/restaurant trade.

"Many restaurateurs are wary of beef from older animals, because they associate age with potential toughness, and darker coloured meat," he said.

Consumers generally in Australia had become used to eating very young beef. "The view has been that tenderness is everything, while flavour is not that important. But I sense a change in that mood. To me, consumers are starting to recognise the depth of flavour that can only be achieved from cattle from the ox category – often 30 to 36 months of age.

"Handled right, it can still have acceptable tenderness – god gave us teeth for a reason – and it has tremendous flavour," he said.

Mr Perry cited the Cape Grim Natural beef brand produced by Greenhams in Tasmania as a good example, which he is using in his new restaurant ventures. "It is tremendous product, exhibiting marbling scores of 2 or higher. Too much yearling beef is generic in flavour, whereas older product speaks of the terroir (soil character, more traditionally associated with wine characteristics), and carries the natural flavour of beef that more discerning customers are looking for."

"To me, this is starting to catch on, and I hope it takes greater hold across the industry."

Mr Perry said many restaurants were willing to sacrifice a little tenderness in the quest for flavour, and with appropriate aging programs, much of that difference could be removed, regardless. He also saw a growing opportunity at restaurant level for beef products carrying a "Natural" label.

"When I travel overseas, all I hear about Australia is 'clean and green'. I think we need to be careful in states like NSW about allowing genetic modification of crops. The greatest thing our food products have going for them is that wholesome reputation," he said.

"It's a no-brainer for Australia to continue to work towards developing a reputation for humanely treated,

clean and green beef."

However, the word "Natural" needed to be protected to guarantee that it was not compromised by some players who were less committed to the cause than others.

But would people going out to dine at an expensive restaurant necessarily be looking for a product with a "Natural" tag on it, or were they more inclined to look for an "indulgent" reward?

"There is a growing segment that is receptive to Natural items, and I believe the momentum that will grow behind the Natural movement in the next few years will be extraordinary. Words like Natural and sustainable are going to be huge in foods generally over the next decade."

The Rockpool restaurants feature a range of beef items designed to provide menu and flavour contrasts,

from 300-day Rangers Valley grain-fed Angus to long-fed highly-marbled Blackmore's Wagyu and the Cape Grim Natural products.

"Each offers a unique flavour and mouth feel, and we often put together tastings for guests, comparing the attributes of each," Mr Perry said.

"I'm totally supportive of the farmers who care about their animals and go those

extra yards to produce a truly superior product. My restaurant, and my customers, are prepared to acknowledge the higher production costs necessary to create some of these products, in what we pay for them. The best endorsement we can get is for a customer to put his or her hand up and say, 'Wow, that was a great steak'."

One of the points of difference Mr Perry is exploring at his Rockpool restaurants is the development of the business's own dry-aging program, in place of conventional 'wet aged' vacuum packaging.

"It's not for everybody, but we think dry-aging delivers a tremendous depth of flavour," he said.

"It is a more natural means of preserving flavour and tenderness in beef. There is a production cost involved in storage and trim yield loss, but the flavour is cleaner and distinctly different."

Many restaurants are willing to sacrifice a little tenderness in the quest for flavour.

NG. Castrol