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Meet the man who raised your dinner

By: Alina Dizik October 20, 2012

Once in a while, fifth-generation farmer LouisJohn Slagel gets a message that makes him giddy. A recent text told him that Donald Trump called a burger made from Mr. Slagel's cows "the best he's ever tried." Another time, a descendant of Korean royalty visiting Chicago praised a restaurant's steak made from his dry-aged beef. "It makes the long hours worth it," says the 27-year-old, who often works from 5 a.m. to midnight.

Mr. Slagel is the fourth of 13 siblings and has taken the lead in reinventing his family business, Slagel Family Farm, 100 miles southwest of Chicago. In just four years, he has gone to 65 restaurant clients from four and the Slagel name showing up on many of Chicago's farm-to-table menus.

His client list reads like a who's who of Chicago's foodie elite, including James Beard-award-winning chefs Paul Kahan and Stephanie Izard. Longman & Eagle, Publican, Girl & the Goat, Sable Kitchen and Trenchermen buy everything from pork to duck eggs. Additional products are in the works.

Mr. Slagel came back to the family business in 2006 after attending an agriculture-production management program at Joliet Junior College. He wanted to start a family of his own in Fairbury (population: 3,968), where he'd grown up, but realized that the 800-acre farm could not sustain him or his younger siblings who wanted into the business. "It wasn't big enough to support another family," says Mr. Slagel, who was married four years ago and has a 10-month-old son. "We had to get bigger and modernize or take a different approach." His father, Dennis, 59, still works the farm but gave LouisJohn the reins in 2007.

Taking a different approach meant the farm would no longer sell to giants Tyson Foods Inc. or Cargill Inc., because it wasn't getting a premium for its naturally raised livestock, Mr. Slagel says. The farm raises cows, pigs, chickens, rabbits, lamb and turkey, and recently added goat.

"Obviously they can get reasonable prices from farmers who are willing to mass-produce it," he says. To get started, the Slagels leased and remodeled a meat-processing plant and took over a nearby storefront to sell cuts of meat from the farm.

COLD CALLS

With the new processing capabilities, he started cold-calling Chicago-area restaurants to offer his prime-quality meat for those willing to pay a premium. (In September, the average wholesale price per pound of a boneless strip loin was \$5.02, according to CattleFax, a cattle marketing information firm based in Englewood, Colo. Mr. Slagel can fetch triple that for locally grown beef he processes and sells directly.) "We needed customers who were going to use more volume to make the idea work," he says.

It worked. In 2008, Mr. Kahan, owner of Blackbird, Avec and Publican, was one of the first to buy his meat. "Local beef was extremely difficult to come by and it's still not easy," Mr. Kahan says. Landing Mr. Kahan as a client meant instant street cred with the tight network of Chicago's top chefs. Mr. Slagel signed on three more restaurants that year.

Four years later, he's the one getting cold calls. Mr. Slagel gets one or two inquiries a week from Chicago

restaurants wanting to buy his meats. He no longer sells products to the bigger food companies. He estimates the farm's profits are up 35 percent; income is more steady and stable.

Chefs are drawn to the locally farmed meat because animals on the Slagel farm aren't treated with antibiotics or hormones and consume natural feed. The farm's meat is not certified organic, and its cows are not entirely grass-fed, which makes them more affordable to restaurants. The farming methods have carried over from Mr. Slagel's grandfather and are more traditional than those at nearby commercial farms, he says.

"You can see the chickens are raised the way they were meant to be," says Patrick Sheerin, chef and partner at Trenchermen in Wicker Park. "The breasts are not overly sized, and it's real dark meat on the thighs because the chicken gets to be outdoors."

"His beef is not graded, but mostly everything we get is above prime," Mr. Kahan adds. "Some of it looks like Kobe beef."

For Mr. Slagel, getting a behind-the-scenes look at Chicago's food scene has been eye-opening. When Mr. Kahan asked Mr. Slagel to sell him pigskin to make pork rinds, he abided but was confused. Mr. Slagel delivered the pigskin and stayed to taste what the kitchen crew developed.

"I never quite realized you could make pork rinds from pigskin," he says. "I thought it was kind of a fake food that was just called pork rinds." Now, the crackling, spicy rinds made from the farm's pigs are a staple on the Publican menu.

Mr. Slagel still makes a weekly 220-mile round trip to meet the restaurateurs who have helped him build his business. He's the face and the marketing force behind the operation, but he also spends hours tending to the animals alongside his family each week. Chefs appreciate the do-it-all business model.

"It's the whole philosophy of when people used to go and talk to their butcher," says Heather Terhune, executive chef at Sable and a "Top Chef" participant.

FARM DINERS

Constantly looking at ways to diversify, Mr. Slagel introduced farm-to-table dinners at the farm last year. Chicago guests travel to the farm by bus to enjoy a meal by one of the rotating chefs and a quick tour to meet the animals and observe a butchering demo.

"It's well worth the trip to see how the chef and guests are connecting to the farmers," says Ms. Terhune, who participated in a dinner in September. Last month's dinner with Girl & the Goat's Ms. Izard sold out two floors of the barn with 70 diners. In November, Vie's Paul Virant will prepare the last farm-to-table event of the season, a prix fixe meal for \$125 per person.

Soon Mr. Slagel will add pet food to his roster, an all-meat natural dog food to be sold at Chicago's specialty pet stores and boarders. And in January, the family will purchase a nearby 5-acre farmette where his brothers will work once they graduate from college in the next few years.

The Slagels plan to convert what was once a commercial chicken barn there to a more traditional environment raising free-range chickens alongside a few hogs and cows.

"We're going to rip all the cages out and make it not usable in the form that it was—so nobody else can put chickens in it like that," says Mr. Slagel of the cramped environment.

Even as he looks for ways to expand, he's not straying from the farm's old-fashioned principles. "We're doing things the way we've always done them," he says.

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