



The Solari Report

February 22, 2018

The Solari Food Series
The Godfather of
Grass-Fed
with
Bill Niman & Harry Blazer

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Harry Blazer: Here we are on Friday, December 8, 2017. I'm Harry Blazer, and I'm talking with a famous friend of mine, Bill Niman.

Bill Niman: Hi, Harry.

Blazer: Hello, Sir. Where are you right now?

Niman: I'm sitting at the table, looking out at a beautiful California sunny winter day on my farm, which is my favorite place in the world.

Blazer: And where is that?

Niman: It's in Bolinas, California. Don't tell anybody. If you could fly, it is eight miles north of San Francisco, right on the coast. It's a bit of a circuitous drive on Highway 1 along the Marin coast.

Blazer: And you have a special arrangement, right? That land has been sold for conservation or something, but you and your wife have the right to live on it for the rest of your lifetime, correct?



Niman: Close. I don't know if any of your listeners remember James Watt. His primary notion about public lands was to sell them and turn them into cash. Even in that Administration and with that ethos, in 1984 the Department of Interior determined that the ranch that we had and two neighboring ranches were essential to rationalize the border of the Point Reyes National Seashore, which is about a 75,000-acre park. It is also adjacent to a Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which stretches from the Golden Gate Bridge to about 30 miles to the north to the Point Reyes Peninsula.

It's a beautiful treasure. It has about 35,000 wilderness acres in it, and it has unlimited access by San Francisco Bay Area metro visitors. It's about 30 miles from the Golden Gate Bridge by roads on a circuitous route along the California Coast and Highway 1, which will bring you to Bolinas and the Point Reyes National Seashore.

The Point Reyes National Seashore portion of the park is about 75,000 acres with 35,000 acres of wilderness. It's easy for thoughtful visitors from the San Francisco metro area to make day trips to walk and hike and enjoy this beautiful environment right along the coast.

We felt fortunate to be able to include our land to that huge conservation movement, and I have no regrets looking back. We were given the right to farm and ranch our place in a thoughtful manner in addition to a lease on 600 additional acres of park land surrounding our original farm.



Actually, the legislation that created the park in 1962 mandated that pastoral agriculture continue and be allowed to thrive within the park boundaries. So it was very compelling for us to join up.

Blazer: So they might let it continue in perpetuity, or is there a plan to basically get rid of it once the existing farmers go to happy hunting grounds?

Niman: Unfortunately, that's not quite clear, and it does make it difficult to manage. The public conversation around that is, "Yes, the people who are living on it and farming it will get to continue doing so with the tenants in possession, if you will, especially if they are family, at market rates." They have re-upped on the 25-year leases, which most ranchers who sold to the park in the early 1960s took back. So they are now on their follow-up leases of varying terms (I think 5-10 years).

Our place is somewhat unique, and indications are now that they would want to go out of production. We consider that very unfortunate because there is an opportunity for people to experience a natural setting close to a major urban center that has built a productive entity in terms of converting grass to wholesome and delicious food for consumption and providing a hospitable environment for all sorts of wildlife.

So we think that there is a model here that should be supported, and that is what was intended with the original legislation, but there is some waffling on that and responding to public pressure from anti animal ag groups.

Blazer: Let's say that I don't know who Bill Niman is. How could you explain in a few sentences who Bill Niman is? Who is Bill Niman?



Niman: I do enjoy icon status in the animal food world, especially in the animals raised for meats world. In the early 1970s I ended up in the community where I still am today in Bolinas. There was a group of like-minded people who came here from Berkeley and Cambridge and other happening places at that time in the late 1960s. The common purpose and common ground of our small community were really about feeding ourselves and our families and community. It's characterized today as 'getting off of the grid'.

I was a member of that group. We actually did a successful recall of our local government and really began the process of creating a model community.

Fast-forwarding to more recent times, it was the birthplace of the Certified California Organic, and it was the birthplace of Niman Ranch, which is still a major coast-to-coast brand of thoughtfully and wholesomely raised meats – pork, beef, and poultry.

I'm very proud of creating that. I think that of interest in the early 1970s when we were talking about raising our animals and providing a natural environment for them to thrive in, we were doing so without the use of manmade compounds such as hormones and antibiotics – the things that were so ubiquitous at the time and remain ubiquitous in the bulk of the meat supply today.

The industry laughed at me at the time, and now I'm sure that all of your listeners are aware of the public conversation going on about antibiotics in our food and ambitious label claims, if you will, about serving burgers or selling meats and poultry that are antibiotic-free.



That was my contribution to making a more sensible farming and ranching model that led to more sensible practices from the animal's point of view and the environmental point of view and the consumer's point of view in human public health.

Hopefully, I will be remembered for making the food supply safer for billions of people.

Blazer: So were you the father of the natural beef movement?

Niman: Actually, I've been anointed with 'the godfather of natural meat' or 'the godfather of antibiotic-free meat'. It was a quote from *Vanity Fair* or the *New York Times*. Somebody said that I was the Steve Jobs of sustainable meat production, and I'm flattered by that. It's probably an exaggeration, but I certainly played a major role in raising people's consciousness about the risks of using antibiotics and other more threatening manmade compounds in the raising of poultry and meat.

Blazer: Bill Niman has his name on two major brands – what people can buy at Costco under the name Niman Ranch, and then you also formed another company, BN Ranch, which is another brand which you also just sold recently. Tell us about both of those brands.

Niman: The Niman Ranch brand is very strong. As I said earlier, I'm very proud of that creation. I had reasons for leaving it; it wasn't a good fit for me anymore. It was kind of classic founder's struggles with capital.



Ethos changed, and I felt that I had to move on and prove a newer, better model. That company was purchased recently by Perdue – by Jim Perdue and the Perdue family. It's a well-known brand of poultry. With a lot of changes going on in that outfit, all of which are positive, they acquired Niman Ranch, and they are now running it as one of their wholly owned subsidiaries. I feel pretty good about that and the legacy there and what will happen in the future under the guidance of Jim Perdue.

For me in 2007 when I left, I realized that it was really important and I wanted to make it absolutely clear that ruminants and grazing animals that are capable, and able to thrive eating naturally-occurring forage that humans can't thrive on or even survive on, but ruminants and grazing animals can eat that and convert that to wholesome and wonderful foods for humans.

My mission post-Niman Ranch was to demonstrate that grass-fed beef could be every bit as good as grain-fed beef. For me, if it doesn't taste great, it doesn't matter how it was raised or what other contributions it makes for the betterment of the world. I felt that it was essential to prove to the consuming public, especially in North America, that grass-fed beef could be every bit as good as grain-fed beef, as it is in most of the other cattle-producing countries of the world.

That was important because there is so much land being cultivated to raise corn and soybean and the equivalent to feeding to cattle. It's very compelling from an operational business model and on a spreadsheet. It's controllable, and it makes sense. The imperatives are all there to do that. There is only one region of the world where that can be done, and that is North America. More specifically, it's done in the United States and Canada. Therefore, it is done.



There is a great cost both to the environment and to the animals and to the whole notion of plowing and planting and cultivating and spraying and poisoning and harvesting and drying and transporting crops that are grown to grow and finish beef up that is, in my opinion, absurd when the animals can do all of that themselves without human intervention. The only human intervention would be to provide the opportunity for the animals to do that, knowing that North America is 40-50% arid grasslands. It's probably similar to the rest of the world in those percentages. Those are areas that cannot raise crops as we know them because it's too dry. Livestock, especially cattle, will thrive there just as the bison did before European settlers and the huge herds of elk in the West.

Basically, that model works. Instead of trying to manipulate nature, we should follow it. That is what is so exciting about grass-fed beef. It is driven by nature, and we just need to recognize the seasonality of it, just like we do with stone fruit and tomatoes, and allow the cattle to do what they do.

Blazer: Take a minute to talk about that seasonality factor.

Niman: Everything has a season in nature. It's impossible to harvest great grass-fed beef in North America in the winter time; it just doesn't work. But there is a peak season, and because the body condition of grazing animals is driven by nature, if one just thinks about the seasonality of the grasses and other forage that they would eat, when those plants are forming a seed in the late spring and early summer when they're taking the energy from the soil and forming a seed —



because they're hardwired to procreate so that they will be around next year and their primary job is to form a seed. The seed holds all of the concentrated energy of the plant. When the seed is being formed, that forage is really high in protein. That is when you can grow an animal.

When that seed is almost mature and mature, it changes from protein to energy. So you can grow them before the seeds get formed and are hard, and you can fatten them when the seeds are hard and rich.

It goes from protein to carbohydrate, and it goes from growth to energy. All plants do that. You want to harvest the animals off grass at the moment when those seeds are beginning to fall and hit the ground. That is when grazing animals are in prime condition. And it so happens that they are in that prime condition because they need to be to get through the winter which is coming. The seeds are getting ready so that they can hit the ground and be dormant over the winter until they can sprout in the spring. The animals have to have enough body condition to get through the winter so that they can be around to have their next spring.

What the grazing animals do is when that energy is plentiful – when they are in their season of plenty – they gorge themselves on this high-energy seed and they convert that to fat. They store it and they are muscular. That is what marbling is.

Just like a bear is gorging on salmon and berries and whatever they eat just before they hibernate so that their bodies can draw down that stored fat over their hibernation, that is what keeps them going because they are not eating.



The same thing is true with grazing animals. They have to have that intermuscular fat stored when coming into winter to keep them going through the cold weather and the season where there is very little nutrition available to them.

Once you understand that, you can look at the seasonality of your grasses, and you will know exactly when the cattle are ready and at their finest from an eating quality point of view, and also when they have the most weight on them so that post-harvest each animal can feed the most people.

Every farmer and rancher knows exactly when that happens in their particular geography. There is a two-week window which might vary by the amount of rainfall or the amount of heat that you have, but it's almost the same day every year in whatever locale those cattle are in. Knowing where and when to harvest gives you the best eating quality, and it maximizes the potential of each animal.

Blazer: But it takes a little longer to grow a really good grass-fed beef than commercial beef.

Niman: Yes, it does. The animals need three seasons. They need those three seasons of plenty. The first season is with their mother. They get maximum growth. At the beginning of their lactation, they are barely eating any grass. Just before weaning, their diet is at least 50% grass and 50% milk – probably more than 50% grass. That is the very important growth rate.



Calves are coming through and having enough condition where they are fat enough and strong enough so they can get through the next winter with the baby fat that they've stored from all of that milk, and that energy gets utilized over the winter. They change from babies to adolescents with a different frame type. Coming into the following spring they've got a lot more bone and muscle, and they are ready to grow and grow through that next season of plenty.

Then the third spring, after they get through the winter, then they are ready to get fat because they've already grown most of their frame and muscle. All the energy and protein available to them in that third season goes to finish – creating marbling in fat and wonderful beef.

That's a 26-30 month journey. What has happened in the modern system of putting cattle on the feedlot, weaning them, and finishing them on grain? They use the high energy grain ration to mirror that second spring where they grow them, and then the third spring where they fatten them so that that can happen over 180 to 300 days in a feedlot, which is faster and cheaper than turning them out to grass.

Blazer: That brings us to the next question which I was going to ask, which was: Why isn't grass-fed beef cheaper than commercial feedlot beef?

Niman: I think that the primary reason for that is that the professional cattle community has not embraced grass-fed methodology. They are beginning to because it's a marketing opportunity because of that premium. With scale in grass-fed beef, I think that the prices will go down a lot.



Remember that the beef industry in the US – the 50 million cattle that die each year – the bulk of them are handled by three huge companies, Cargill, Tyson, and JBS Swift. Everything that they do is built on efficiencies because their customers are primarily concerned with one thing, and that is the price. So they have had to drive costs down.

In order to drive costs out, it's scale, and it's very difficult for them to work with people who have animals that are only available seasonally. It's very difficult to work with small producers because the processors need, and basically have a captive supply so that they maintain enough cattle going through their plants on a daily basis to support that infrastructure.

It's near-impossible for smaller producers of the grass-fed industry to process cattle in efficient ways. Slaughtering and fabrication add a lot – several hundred dollars per animal. Divide that by the pound, and the efficiencies that are in the modern distribution system that we have are also not easily accessible to the grass-fed industry.

It is important to note that up until World War II almost all of the beef in the US was grass-fed and grass-finished. That was not necessarily good for the farmers and ranchers because the bulk of the cattle came to market in September and October, and prices declined accordingly.

One of the genesis's of grain-finishing was that instead of sending your cattle to market when they were ready in September or October, incidentally at five or six years old, you could put those animals next to your barn and feed them some of the corn or soy that you raised over that season or the year before, and then you could keep the cattle in prime condition. Then you could send them to market in December and January when very few people had cattle available because winter had set in.



A lot of these changes were driven by this kind of compelling ability to capture a higher market. But I see every day more professional cattle people – and remember that there are fewer people raising cattle today than ever before – with large and professional outfits doing that and trying to become part of a grassfed enterprise. I’m hopeful that we will see more of that in the future.

There has been an unfortunate consequence of the interest in the professional community because, as in all forms of agriculture today, all people who are involved want to scale it up and industrialize it because they want to leverage infrastructure, and they prefer to have capital-intensive operations rather than labor-intensive operations. What that has led to is bigger, efficient, heavily capitalized, capital-intensive operations. What is going on is there are now cattle being raised in feedlots that are marketed as grassfed. It’s called ‘forage-fed’.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the compelling things about grass is you don’t have to plow, plant, harvest, transport, dry, and all of those other inputs in order to raise the feed to feed cattle that are in confinement. If you allow the cattle to graze, they will do that all by themselves.

What is happening with some of the professional cattle people who want to enter into the category of ‘grass-fed’ because of those seductive premiums is they decide, “Let’s put a whole bunch of cattle in the feedlot, and we’ll feed them a ‘forage ration.’”

So it’s harvested plants including the seed that they store and deliver to cattle and feed them in a feedlot, and that is being sold as ‘grass-fed’ beef. That is an unfortunate occurrence that we are trying to make part of a public conversation. Maybe this could be part of that conversation, Harry?



Blazer: Let me ask the question in another way: If all I have to do is turn my cattle out and have them just eat grass, why shouldn't that be considerably cheaper than what the conventional market has to do and all of that planting and harvesting and transporting and so on?

Niman: If you have grass, you don't have that much. You may have a really big ranch where you can raise 1,000 or 2,000 or 3,000 animals, but that is not an efficient business model when it comes to getting cattle finished and shipped to slaughter and having a relationship with the slaughter plant.

What happens to people who have grass is they use that for mother cows. So you can have a mother cow on there, and every year she will produce a calf. That calf is the cash crop and the 'cash cow'.

So you have an opportunity to convert your grass to income each year by grazing a calf. If you were to keep that calf for three years on the same grass on the same ranch, you would end up with one animal to sell – albeit at more money than the calf – but far less than the total of the three calves that you might be able to wean and the salvaged value of the cow for that same period.

Blazer: So that exactly explains it. You basically have three crops instead of one out of the same plant.

Niman: Exactly. Then, of course, because these are living animals in the natural world, you want to convert them to cash as soon as you can because they do die and they do get sick, and they do get injured.



To mitigate the risk of losing money on each animal or having a disaster, the sooner you get them to market and convert them to cash, the less risk there is involved.

Blazer: Bill, we have known each other for a while. Tell the listeners a little about our relationship and how far it goes back and what we have done together.

Niman: We've been around the world together – from Australia to the U.K. and Scotland and Atlanta, Georgia. We've been in Canada. We've been everywhere.

I have to thank you, Harry, for introducing me to these parts of the world and the thoughtful meat people there who are ranchers and farmers. I am still working in those areas with some of the same people. I'm really grateful for that.

I can't help but remember the early days of Niman Ranch when Harry had this incredible market chain in the Atlanta metro area, Harry's Farmer's Market. There were three flagship stores that made Walmart look small. They were phenomenal food stores, and they were just food, including bakeries and kitchens and all sorts of things going on within the walls.

So Harry reached out to us at Niman Ranch, trying to source the best possible meats in the world, and we got to meet Harry. The circumstances of our meeting were memorable.



Those of you who know Harry will understand it and realize that he was totally in character that day. The key management from Niman Ranch, myself and the other young man who was brilliant and great, were also meeting with Whole Foods on that trip from San Francisco to Atlanta. Actually, Trader Joe's was a huge customer of ours at that time on the West Coast. The Whole Foods people told us that if we were going to sell to Trader Joe's, then they weren't going to buy from us on the East Coast.

We said, "We understand. That is unfortunate, and we're sorry that you feel that way." As a result of that meeting going on for a long time, we were actually late for the primary reason for our trip, which was going to Atlanta to meet Harry.

We apologized for being late and thoughtlessly announced that we had been hung up at Whole Foods. Harry went ballistic inside, and he said, "I don't want to meet with you guys right now. Just go sit out there for a while," or something to that effect. He disciplined us in a very thoughtful way, and we got the message and understood that Harry Blazer was far more important to us than Whole Foods. That proved to be true over the years – until he sold his outfit to Whole Foods. Then we had to move on.

It was a great journey, and Harry was the biggest customer at Niman Ranch, which is saying something because we were a good-sized company at that time.



Blazer: Yes, and that was with only three stores in Atlanta, too.

I'm going to now make it a little more personal. We will make another kind of a deep dive into this because now we've let the cat out of the bag that we've known each other for a very long time. There were two guys who I respected the most in the meat business, and they were Mel Coleman, Sr. and yourself. I had both of you represented, and I think – like you mentioned – at the time I was the best customer to both of you guys. I was totally committed to providing the best beef.

Niman: And pork, too. We had a huge pork contract.

Blazer: That's right. It was pork, too.

To me, there is a huge amount of misinformation about descriptors like 'natural' which, to me, has no meaning anymore. But there is some merit to 'never ever' which is kind of what your beef was and had been for many, many years. Why don't you describe how that is used in the industry? What does 'never ever' mean?

Niman: It is supposed to mean that the animals have never been given antibiotics, either therapeutically, prophylactically, or sub-therapeutically. 'Therapeutically' means to treat them when they are ill. 'Prophylactically' would mean if you are going to stress them and they are likely to get ill, give them a shot before you administer some animal husbandry that is stressful, such as weaning and transporting. 'Sub-therapeutically' is giving them minute doses every day to prevent illness and replace good husbandry when you are crowding animals.



Also, that promotes growth for some reasons that actually haven't been proven yet today.

'Never ever' means that they have never had antibiotics for any of those three reasons.

Blazer: Doesn't that include hormones, too?

Niman: It's usually mentioned. If someone is not feeding antibiotics, then they are not likely to use hormones. The people who strongly and firmly believe that is the right thing to do are also sympathetic to not using hormones or the whole cocktail of things that are used from beta-agonists and steroids. One of the horror stories today is the hormones and minute doses of antibiotics every day and ionophores. So there is a whole host of cocktail things that are used.

Rarely does anyone using one of those not use all of them because there are compelling economic imperatives for using all of the available growth-promoting tools.

Blazer: As long as you can externalize costs.

Niman: Right. The consequences to human public health is in the billions and billions as well as what happens to the environment. We haven't even begun to realize that it costs us more and more people, and a lot of diseases are resistant to antibiotic therapies. This is a disaster ---a system failure--- right around the corner, and it all starts with the misuse of antibiotics in the animal food world.



Let me say this: I firmly believe that a very large percentage of the never-ever antibiotic meats available are probably not authentic and need to be verified. That is coming.

Blazer: So now we have ‘never-ever’ that you can’t trust unless you actually know your farmer or producer and the brand, and then you have the whole grass-fed thing, which is suspicious because of the way that it’s being done.

Talk a little bit more about grass-fed versus grass-finished versus 100% grass-fed and how these terms are used and if there is any sort of regulatory definitions for these things.

Niman: Unfortunately there are not. It’s a really sad state of affairs, and hopefully, it will get remedied.

Genuinely grass-fed beef is really hard to find. Even when you take the American Grass-Fed Association, which is a group of really good farmers and ranchers who are touting grass-fed, and that is what they do, they have a long list of food byproducts that can be fed – none of which consumer or anybody in their right mind would think was grass.

So even the highest standards and all of the branded programs that say ‘grass-fed’ or ‘grass-finished’ or ‘only grass-fed’ or ‘pure grass-fed’ are using soybean hulls or almond hulls or cottonseed meal. Those are part of a long list of grain or plant byproducts that can be fed to cattle and still call them ‘grass-fed beef’. The USDA has allowed that.



Blazer: In fact, that cottonseed would be GMO.

Niman: I didn't know that cottonseed was genetically modified, but you are up to date on all of that.

Worse than that, Harry, cottonseed meal is a great livestock feed. It really works. It is second only to soybean in terms of its protein and how the animals can utilize it and thrive on it. But because cotton is a plant that is not raised for human consumption, whatever regulations there are and as thin as they are around the use of pesticides on crops for human consumption versus fiber crops is quite different.

So the herbicides and pesticides used on cotton are intense, and they could not be used on corn or soy, but they are manifest in the cottonseed meal. So wherever cottonseed meal can be acquired cheaply in cotton-growing regions, it's always fed to cattle, and it really works.

Blazer: It just so happens, Bill, that the two most contaminated farmlands are lands that have grown cotton or tobacco. That is what I've been told.

Niman: If you want to get enough glyphosate to put you down to get cancer, I guess you can just eat some cottonseed-fed beef. I'm sure that it's glyphosate that is going through there.

Blazer: It's a remarkable amount of different types of stuff. It's very toxic with a lot of heavy metals on top of it. They put a lot of stuff on there besides glyphosate, which we are now learning is an insidious poison.



But I interrupted you. Were you going to make another point?

Niman: Bring me back to Earth.

Blazer: Let me ask you this question. We're going to go back to this 'never ever' and '100% grass-fed'. As a matter of fact, maybe you can finish on that.

Basically, given that there are no regulations on the use of the terms, if you don't know your producer, you don't really know what you're getting. That is really what it comes down to, correct?

Niman: That is correct. We can't depend on third-party outfits to verify the claims either. And we certainly can't depend on the USDA to verify any of their programs.

The reason why I'm so up on this, as you know, is because over the last three years I've been working with a Stanford medical Ph.D. to develop a quick, cheap, and easy test for antibiotic and 35 different manmade compounds that are commonly used in feeding livestock, poultry, pork, and beef. We just completed and are just about ready to go to market with this device so that businesses will be able to authenticate and verify claims made by livestock people and meat companies.

Blazer: Is it by taking a sample of the muscle meat by blood?

Niman: It currently works on flesh – raw or cooked – and urine. We will be working on blood as well very shortly. It's not unlike a pregnancy test, quite frankly.



It will eventually enable the consumer to test the chicken that they buy with ‘never ever’ claims before they eat it if they want to know, and it will certainly enable the customers who are feeding people and want to do the right thing. They are paying a premium to buy ‘never ever’, and they want to make sure that they are getting it. It’s not just about the money, but it’s because they want to feed people wholesome food.

A huge percentage of the product being purchased is ‘never ever’ and ‘without manmade compounds’ is actually not that. So we are going to provide a tool for people to authenticate and verify that.

Blazer: That requires that there be residue in whatever material you are testing. So isn’t it possible that you could give antibiotics to cattle early in its life and it would not show up in this test?

Niman: It will happen, and therefore the risk to human public health eating that flesh is nonexistent in the context of antibiotic resistance being transferred. To me, it’s really not essential to be ‘never ever’, but that is a label claim that is easier to manage than the ‘never used to promote growth sub-therapeutically or prophylactically; only therapeutically, and it is residue free’.

Now we will be able to know if something is actually without any trace of antibiotics. Therefore the threat to the human public health by creating resistant pathogens should be nonexistent in that animal.

Blazer: So down to what part per million will you be able to test?



Niman: We're talking about parts per trillion. The reason why I'm bringing this up is that I'm so aware of what is happening now in the label claims and the lack of genuineness there.

In our testing of cattle, to develop this technology we obviously had to test a lot and collaborate with some very big companies that are wanting to genuinely make antibiotic-free claims. They don't care about 'never ever'; they want to be antibiotic-free.

We have tested hundreds of heads of cattle that we are very confident are being raised without being fed or administered antibiotics in any way.

Blazer: You mean like your cattle?

Niman: That, too. That is another subject because I believe in using antibiotics to treat animals that are sick. That is a very important thing for me, but let's not go there yet.

Blazer: But then you cull them, right?

Niman: No. I don't because we don't sell 'never ever' antibiotics; we sell meat that is free of any antibiotic or any antibiotic residue.

Blazer: We will go there in a minute. Keep going.

Niman: Yes, that is something that I would like to proselytize about. But I am aware of the 'never ever' and the technology assigned to that.



Remember that we are talking primarily about grain-finished cattle that are raised ‘never ever’ and sold that way. They are usually raised in large feedlots, and the feedlots are almost always dual purpose or dual methodology. So they will have cattle that are being raised and fed conventionally with medicated rations and the whole cocktail of the things that promote growth and get the cattle to market sooner.

Blazer: The things that put weight on them, which may be in the form of water, too.

Niman: That is correct. So cattle that are raised in lots that are dual purpose and dual methodology, it’s important to note that antibiotics are excreted in the urine of animals, and some other drugs are excreted in the poop, and they end up on the ground, in the dirt, and become part of airborne particulates in the dust.

What we’ve found, because now we can test to parts per trillion, is that cattle that are raised in feedlots, even though they’re not fed or administered any antibiotics, are testing positive for very minute doses of antibiotics in their urine.

Blazer: This is through the respiratory system?

Niman: Yes. They are picking it up in the airborne particulates because the antibiotics spend a long time and have a long half-life in the soil, and in windy, dry areas they can travel quite a bit just like pollen does.



What is customary is you might raise some conventional beef in one pen, and then the next cattle that go into that pen could be a natural or antibiotic-free cattle, and they are just picking up the stuff. Or, it could be that the pen 100 yards away on the same campus has antibiotics that travel through the air.

One of the things in the future is if you really want to get stuff that is not going to have a ‘contact high’ or wasn’t fed antibiotics by mistake because the animals in the next pen were getting antibiotic-laced ration, you have to have sources of cattle from feedlots in the grain-finish that are completely and 100% dedicated to antibiotic-free, and that is rarely the case today.

Again, that is a part of the industry being controlled by so few people and so few outfits. Everything is big and many large numbers. They have facilities that have dual purpose set-ups.

Blazer: But we don’t need to worry because the FDA and the USDA and the EPA are doing such a fantastic job as guardians of our health.

Niman: As bad of a job as they were doing, up until recent times they are doing a much worse job today. I did not know that was even possible, but under the current leadership, it’s astoundingly dangerous.

Blazer: We will do a little more there, but I just wanted to clarify one point. You’ve got three seasons for grass-fed cattle, and you go through a winter season where obviously grass is sometimes not available in some places, and it’s certainly not in its prime. So do you feed hay during that time, which is basically dried grass? What do you do to keep the cattle going?



Niman: What we do and what the primary world areas and pastoral areas that raise grass-fed beef – whether it’s Argentina or Tasmania or Brazil or California – we are blessed with year-round natural forage that the animals can thrive on. In the BN Enterprise, we chose to move cattle around a small geographic area so that they are always grazing on good feed. So they can be on the mild coastal areas in the wintertime, which is our growing season, and then they can go 80 miles away and be on lush grass in the summer, or in the foothills of the Sierras or the coastal ranges and have grass in spring and winter.

We choose to move cattle so that they are always on one nutritious green feed, and they are always growing.

Blazer: Of course, that is the natural model because the herds used to migrate.

Niman: That’s what was done in the British Isles where the British breeds obviously come from. The cattle would be in the high country in the summer and the low country in the winter, and they would get by.

As you get to colder climates, obviously in Montana where you live, the intense growing season in the springtime and early summer, the cattle cannot keep up with that grass. So you harvest some of the grass and dry it to feed the cattle in the wintertime. That does a really good job of maintaining your mother cows through the cold months, even when they first calve in the early spring. But in terms of growing animals, it has limited potential.



Most of the young cattle in Montana now will ship in the fall to either feedlots in Nebraska, or western Kansas where the climate is a little more hospitable and the grains are plentiful.

Blazer: Just go over the cycle – semination, gestation, birth. What is that period of time, and when does it generally happen?

Niman: That, of course, is driven by nature. In the cattle industry or the cattle world, everything is driven by when your mother cows calve and when you want them to calve and give birth to their calves. So there is a nine-month, two-week gestation.

The key factor is that you want your calf to be born when the nutrition available to the mother is at its poorest because a mother cow will only produce as much milk as her offspring will take. So a newborn calf obviously is going to require much less milk than a calf just prior to weaning at 500-600 pounds.

Blazer: Weaning is where they come off the milk.

Niman: Weaning is when they are separated from their mother, and they no longer have milk. So what you want is the grasses – the natural feed – abundant when the separation from their mothers and no longer have access to milk. All mother cows are out on grass or forage or natural-raised land.

A Montana example is you want them to calve in February or March, depending on how brave you are, because there is very little natural forage available, but the mother doesn't need that much because she's not



It's barely more than what she would need to maintain her body and grow a calf inside.

As the spring approaches and grasses start growing, the calf has already doubled in size from birth over the first couple of months. The calf is now requiring more milk. Getting closer to the spring and summer, there is more feed available for the mother cow, so you can match her nutritional needs to produce milk with the calf's ability to utilize the milk with the natural occurring nutrition that the mother will graze and convert to milk.

Blazer: That is a perfect explanation.

Niman: The final determinant is in autumn you have to make sure that there is enough feed leftover for the mother to get in condition to get through the winter to have her next calf. So you have to separate that calf from the mother so that instead of making milk, she makes body fat, and it improves her condition. It flushes out getting ready for the winter and storing intermuscular fat just like a bear would to get through the winter months.

Blazer: So generally what weight in the commercial world and in your world is the calf when it's weaned?

Niman: The commercial cows and calves are raised very similar to what the highest standard in organic and antibiotic-free/natural beef is. There is very little difference at that stage until weaning. What really drives the weaning weight and timing is the area that you live in.



If you live in one of the places in the world that are blessed with a mild climate – New Zealand, Tasmania, Argentina, or California – your calves are weaned at about nine months of age because the mothers don't have to get back in condition. It's not as difficult for them to get back into condition to get through a mild winter or a dry season.

Blazer: At nine months what would they weigh?

Niman: They would average 600-650 pounds. In Montana in similar climates, you would need to wean at six months of age, and the calves' weigh about 500 pounds. This all assumes that there is no supplemental feeding; it's all mother milk and naturally occurring forage.

Blazer: Traditionally is weaning when that calf would go to the feedlot?

Niman: What 'traditionally' means to me is what happened 40-50 years ago.

Blazer: I should say 'conventionally' how does it work?

Niman: Primarily the calves come off of the mother and they go to the feedlots because it's cheaper to grow them and finish them in a grain finishing lot than it is to manage them out on grass and run the risk of death and predator loss and animals getting away and all of the things that go along with that.

Historically, when I started doing this 40-50 years ago, cattle would go from weaning to spending a year out on the grass, and then they would go to a feedlot.



More and more it's become cheaper and more compelling as a business to take the calves a month or so after weaning and put them into a feedlot to grow and finish them simultaneously and have them dead at 14-16 months of age.

Blazer: But it's really about control. It's really about being able to control the supply and even out that supply curve as much as possible. That is more of the reason why they do it.

Niman: Absolutely. To the meat companies, it is essential to have a consistent, predictable supply every day of the year. That is very compelling for that business. For the farmers, we don't consider feedlots farmers. For the feedlot operators, it's also very compelling to have cattle every day of the year that are finished.

The only way to manage that is by using grains and starting cattle and finishing cattle in a predictable way. The primary driver in that is that it is much cheaper and much easier and scalable to use feedlots. There are a lot of feedlots with 100,000 animals in them right now at one time.

A feedlot that was near us in Idaho was 175,000 animals in one place, all in small areas. They were being fed every day and going down the road to the slaughterhouse 300 days a year. That is a business, and it's forecastable, it's manageable, and it's hedgable. It's something that from a spreadsheet point of view is very compelling. It's just the ultimate in human desire to control nature rather than thrive alongside it.

Blazer: We've basically tried to apply the assembly line model to the growing of our food.



Niman: Yes, and unfortunately it is happening in everything in the food industry, and it is really scary. This is why I'm so focused now on developing some science and technology to verify these claims. The consumers are being swindled and confused, and the only way to support small or medium-sized, sensible agriculture is to prove beyond any reasonable doubt what is going on out there today so that people become aware of it and can change their purchasing patterns.

Blazer: I think it's important for the listeners to understand that when you're doing this feedlot, you are basically feeding GMO grains. It's not just antibiotics and your cocktails, but it's corn, soy, cottonseed, canola, alfalfa, and these are major GMO crops. So their diet is almost 100% GMO.

Niman: And we haven't even touched on the carbon situation and the destruction of topsoil, which is our nation's most valuable resource, and how much of that is going down the Mississippi River because we're turning it over every year, and how much manmade nitrogen is going into it and poisoning the oceans. The global warming could probably be remedied if we stopped plowing and planting so much ground and allow the soil to sequester carbon and cover on it. It goes on and on and on endlessly.

Blazer: Bill, I want to make a few statements and see if you agree with them. We have a lot of pressure from certain progressive groups, you might say, or 'regressive' groups about how the world really needs to stop feeding cattle and needs to go vegetarian or vegan – not just from a humane perspective, but because that is a much more efficient way to feed people than feeding grain to cattle and then eating the cattle.



What we have is this astonishingly magnificent, totally sustainable closed-loop system of this machine that eats grass and turns it into delicious protein and nutritious fat. Not only that, but what we know is that when we graze cattle and we do it properly, which is basically intense grazing in a certain area and then moving them on instead of just keeping them on a piece of land for months and months at a time, that that rangeland and that pasture improves in health.

You have this amazing circle to produce amazing food. It seems that what would make more sense than even conventional agriculture or traditional agriculture where you're doing tilling and adding all kinds of inputs and you're exposing carbon to the air is to actually eat more meat that is raised according to these protocols that you follow. What do you think on that?

Niman: I think that you said it brilliantly. Eat more beef, lamb, and goat. It's the best thing for the environment and human public health. People need to understand that it also has maintained habitat for wildlife that is totally dependent on grassland. We didn't even touch on how much carbon grassland sequesters. People need to also understand that 50-60% of the world is arid rangeland only suitable for grazing. These animals are an incredible gift to us that they are there, and we need to allow them to thrive.

The number of grazing animals on the landscape today in North America is far fewer than what was here before the European settlers arrived – or before humans.



Blazer: And we survived all of those methane farts for that long. What do you know?

Niman: We have to come back to the methane, but let me talk about something else first. People also need to understand that the evolution of the human species anthropologically, we are all designed to eat meat. We thrive on meat. There are things that are essential to the survival of our species for young bodies and minds to grow and thrive. Those things are almost exclusively available and in the best possible form of red meat.

The effect that the B12 has on the growth of the human brain is astounding. It's not available anywhere else in the complete form that it is in red meat. It's barely available in pork anymore because of the glyphosate situation. That is a whole different subject.

Now, what did I ask you to bring me back to?

Blazer: Before we get to that, another point that I wanted to bring up was that I respect the Weston Price organization. What you have just talked about – among other things – is their philosophy. Dr. Price probably did the most extensive studies on diet and health of anybody – and of anyone since.

You can't get the vitamins A's, the vitamin D's, and these K2s even if you ate huge amounts of vegetables unless you have very high-quality meat with very high-quality fat because these are fat-soluble vitamins.



We have been given such a line of crap from the medical industry based on absolutely faulty studies or poorly understood studies about the role of cholesterol, the role of healthy fats – and I’m talking about saturated fats, not the polyunsaturated fats, which now we are understanding is really an enemy of health – about the role of salt which is a high-quality salt, not processed salt. These naturally occurring nutrients in nutrient-dense food that is pasture-raised are some of the healthiest eating that you can do. Not only that, but it is absolutely essential for growth and for thriving.

Niman: Exactly. We’ve been doing that for almost two million years, and we don’t thrive without it.

Talk about bad information creating a disastrous trend! This whole thing about fat when all along it was sugar!

Blazer: That’s right. Sugar was making you fat, and it was also making you sick – especially the processed sugars.

Niman: Now when you look at the incidence of heart disease and deaths from heart problems, animal fat became taboo and everybody was talking about ‘lean and light’ and giving up your animal fat because it was ‘bad for your heart’.

Then you look at the actual stats, and you see the rise and incidence of heart disease and deaths from heart problems, and it goes in the absolute opposite direction of animal fat consumption. So not only would eating more fat be better for your heart and you would have fewer deaths related to the heart, but also it’s the carbohydrates that the advocates of low-fat diets have converted us all to that really lead to the rising incidence of heart disease.



Blazer: It's got to be high quality saturated fats. That is what you need – the butter, the raw milk, the beef with a lot of intramuscular fat. That is what you need.

At some point, I want to get your commitment here to come back because I want to talk in another interview, because we're getting close to where we need to end at this point, on pork and poultry. You've raised heirloom turkeys, and you've raised the best pork I've ever eaten. And by the way, you've raised the best beef I've ever eaten. But I want to ask just a couple of more questions. It's just been an absolute delight, and I can't tell you how much I love you.

Niman: Same here. It goes both ways.

Blazer: Bill, I want you to talk about the relationships with these big brand names. I'll be respectful and not name any, but there are a lot of these companies that try to talk about how they have great vendor relations, they support their vendors, they have all of these ratings for humanely-raised and all of this other stuff. But when it comes down to it – because I know from being behind the curtain – they're not particularly vendor-friendly to people like you, are they?

Niman: There are several points there. First of all, there are very few third party verifying outfits about humanely raised animals that are reliable and that we should support beyond AWA and Farm Forward. Those are the only ones that I am confident in. Maybe HSUS.



As for the big guys, let's face it. We talked earlier about the grass-fed being so expensive. The industry sees opportunity and they realize that small start-ups and thoughtful companies like the ones I've founded were getting market share and the market share was growing, and they didn't want to lose that. They wanted to take advantage of it and felt that it was an opportunity.

Why does Perdue own Niman Ranch? They need to be in that category because there is growing consumer interest. Do they really believe in the basic ethos and reasons for beginning Niman Ranch? I would say, "If they did, then why weren't they doing that themselves?" It's not difficult; it's just expensive.

Why did Hormel buy Applegate for \$1 billion or \$800 million or whatever it was? Was it because they believed in it? Why are they torturing 90% of the pork that they produce and selling it in their Hormel labels as opposed to doing something that supposedly is different at Applegate?

It would be comforting – in another way of answering your question – if either policy-makers or the big, efficient outfits that can drive costs out between the farm and the plate would embrace alternative agriculture or sensible animal agriculture and help get those animals to market instead of creating roadblocks or hurdles that one has to get over that make it impossible. So it is a huge challenge.

The industry is not fostering a better source and supporting people who are doing the right thing.



Blazer: How about those famous retailers out there who tout their wonderful relationships with animals and other humans? They can be challenging, too, can't they?

Niman: Considering that most of them are false and everything is driven by price and covering your own butt by just accepting claims that are being made by cheaper, larger brands, which are probably not very genuine.

Blazer: So you enjoyed doing business with me.

Niman: Let's be careful to make sure that people understand that there are quite a few thoughtful retailers like Harry's Farmer's Market was, and there are quite a few thoughtful restauranteurs who want to do the right thing and are doing everything they can to do the right thing. So there are good outfits out there, but they are hard to find.

Blazer: It seems that the bigger they get, and the more concentrated the power, the less user-friendly they are.

Niman: There are very few ways that businesses can drive the costs out. Most costs are fixed. In the food industry there are a few variable costs, and in the restaurant, it's your food cost. Everything else is pretty much your control. In grocery stores, you could say the same thing.

Blazer: For me, a key word here is 'intentionality'. I think that I had the right intention, and you have had the right intention since I've known you about trying to raise and sell and promote nutrient-dense, pure, great-tasting food.



I want to go back to this thing because the best grain-fed steaks I've ever eaten were from you, and the best grass-fed steaks I've ever eaten are from you. So do you think that you can produce as good-tasting grass-fed as you can grain-fed beef?

Niman: Yes, I do. Once you have crossed over to great premium grass-fed beef, you can't go back.

Blazer: It has a bit of a different taste profile, right?

Niman: It's not that different, but it's the greasiness and the difficulty in digesting and coating your mouth with fat. Let's put it this way: Fat sweetens and tones down the flavor, especially grain-finished fat.

Blazer: So the point is that cattle were really meant to eat grass, not that much grain. Is that right?

Niman: That is correct. It's amazing how many grain-finished cattle people and how many grain-finished mavens and people who swear by Nebraska corn-fed beef, when they eat a great steak in Argentina or Tasmania or Australia, or in California or New York for that matter, who have never been fed anything but grass think, "Man, this stuff is good."

It's being done right and well. You start with the right cattle, and you give them the opportunity to maximize their genetic potential. If you have patience, they will do it. Unfortunately, it is true as well that there has been so much bad grass-fed beef presented, especially in our country, by people who really don't know what they are doing but want to do the right thing and are harvesting the cattle too soon or when they're not ready or trying to harvest them on a year-round basis when you can't do it.



Who would want to eat a tomato in January from North America?

Blazer: I will tell you that some of the worst beef I've tasted is from some of these big-name guys who are supposedly doing '100% grass-fed'. They just absolutely do not know how to do it right, and you do.

Niman: Exactly. What we are doing is not extraordinary. We are just following nature and harvesting when they are best in season, just like you would with anything else that you want to eat.

Blazer: And that makes it extraordinary. It may be no mystery, but the way that you are doing it is extraordinary because so few people are doing it.

Niman: Exactly.

Blazer: There are two other areas I want to touch on quickly. From your perspective, English breeds product the best-tasting beef, right?

Niman: Yes, British breeds. The reason for that is that they have evolved in a geography and culture that only had grass to feed to cattle. Historically those breeds on the British Isles, versus being on the continent of Europe where they did have some crops that that they could feed to cattle, they were not able to do that in the UK.

Blazer: What are the names of some of those breeds, some of which you own?



Niman: The breed that dominates the world is Black Aberdeen Angus, which originated in Scotland. Then there is Hereford, which is a dominant breed from the Hereford region of the UK, which dominated the world prior to the Black Angus.

Wherever you can raise these cattle, wherever the climate is hospitable for these kinds of cattle, they are usually raised and they should be. Along with a lean, light movement, the continental breeds – which are Simmental, Charolais, Limousin, and some of these popular breeds – were introduced to make cattle that got big and had a lot of muscle but didn't have any of the marbling. They were cattle that historically were slaughtered as veal as opposed to raised to maturity. It was never an issue on their ability to thrive and get fat on grass because they were killed off their mother's milk. Their mothers were dual-purpose cattle; they were kept for milk as well as meat. That is another story for our next conversation.

Definitely the British breeds, wherever they can be raised in the world, and they are being raised in the world today, thrive and make the best meat.

Blazer: In order to supply your customers with somewhat of a year-round supply of fresh meat, you actually go somewhere else in the world to get beef at certain times of the year.



Niman: If you want to harvest cattle at the right time of the year and you want to do it on a year-round basis, you had better be in the Southern Hemisphere, which is an absolutely complimentary season. It just so happens that they raise a lot of great grass-fed beef down there.

Wherever you go in the world, it's the same genetics. The only thing that is different is the season.

Blazer: The last thing that I want to talk about is entrepreneurs like yourself who are incredibly well-intentioned and hard-working and totally trustworthy, doing business with huge integrity to a high ethical standard, and the same story happened with Mel Coleman, Sr. You guys ended up building great companies, but really weren't able to take advantage of the financial benefits that accrued from that. Why don't you talk a little bit about that challenge?

Niman: Hopefully someday I will figure out how to monetize my values. It may not be possible. There are people who believe that there are things more important than making a lot of money. People who want to genuinely feed the world or their neighbors or their families great food have to realize that this is not something that you can make a lot of money at.

If you are compelled to make money at it, and you think that you can by scaling, it can only be done by torturing the environment, torturing the animals, or providing something that isn't as wholesome as it should be for people to eat.



So I'm afraid that the business of feeding people with high integrity and raising animals in the best possible way is a lifestyle that can provide a living, but it cannot create personal wealth. If that is your goal, you are probably not going to be able to find a harmonic way of doing it and treating the animals and the environment well.

Blazer: It can't be a way of making the right kind of money that you deserve if the system is rigged, which it is because those guys are subsidized in a huge way. Also, the regulations allow practices that should never be allowed if your concern is really protecting human health.

The system is rigged. If the system wasn't rigged, then if farmers were compelled to do the right kinds of things for the environment and the people and the animals, they could be making a decent living.

Niman: Correct. I totally agree with that.

Blazer: Also, Bill, as entrepreneurs grow their companies, and because in this cattle business so much of the cattle market is really controlled by the futures markets by these big players, you end up always needing capital. For the entrepreneur, that generally means dilution of their ownership. So many times you're diluted down to such a small amount that you end up with almost nothing in trying to make your business survive and thrive. Isn't that the case?



Niman: I've been there a couple of times – maybe three. So, yes, it's painful and frustrating, but it hasn't discouraged me from doing the right thing or trying to fix it. I'm not claiming poverty, but the kind of wealth that you've been close to and I've been close to, and the kind of wealth and money that has been made off of our labors and our visions is huge, and we haven't participated in it. That is sad from the point of view of people not getting rewarded for their accomplishments and contributions, but it wouldn't change anything for me.

I still feel absolutely right about everything that I've done, and I wouldn't do it differently if I were to do it over again. Well, there might be some wisdom that I would utilize so that my family would have a little more wealth to thrive on, but basically I've done the right thing, and I feel good about it. I'm thankful that I've had the opportunity to contribute that.

Blazer: We've made a choice about how we want to live our lives.

Bill, you are a remarkable human. You've done huge amounts in many ways that most people don't know about to help give us some great food. I've personally benefitted from a longstanding relationship with you, as have my customers and anybody I can convince to listen to what you have to teach.

I really appreciate this opportunity to visit with you, and I hope that we can do it again and talk about a few other commodities, too.

Niman: I would love to. Any subject in the world I have an opinion on.



Blazer: You're the best. I love you. Thank you so much.

Niman: Thank you, Harry. Cheers!

MODIFICATION

Transcripts are not always verbatim. Modifications are sometimes made to improve clarity, usefulness and readability, while staying true to the original intent.

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