

## Making it in Montana: The Project is Meat: Packing plant expands products, services



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Beef aficionados swear the best way to boost a steak's flavor and tenderness is to give it a rest.

The technique, known as dry aging, has received a lot of attention in food-related publications lately, even though it has been around for decades. The beef carcass hangs in a cooler for anywhere from 10 days to two weeks after slaughter. Natural enzymes in the meat break down connective tissue, resulting in beef that's more tender and flavorful.

Dry aging was common when urban neighborhoods and small towns had their own butcher shops. But now that industrial-scale packing plants have changed the industry, most beef is cut, vacuum packed and shipped within 24 hours of slaughter, in a process known as wet aging.

Shane Flowers, owner of Project Meats, a packing plant and butcher shop at 6608 Highway 312, says he usually ages beef for 13 to 16 days, or longer if the customer wants it.

Some studies say that aging beef beyond 10 days doesn't significantly improve flavor, Flowers said.

"A lot of people argue that 14 days is pretty good, but once you get past 14 days, there's more dryness and you start getting into spoilage that you have to trim off and throw away," he said.

Flowers, a native of Cody, Wyo., grew up around agriculture and studied animal science at Northwest College in Powell.

"It was interesting to follow the process from the animal to the plate," he said.

He and his wife, Tanya, purchased Project Meats a little more than three years ago. After extensive remodeling, the owners transformed the plant into a state inspected facility, which allows meat to be sold to the public.

A state inspector visits Project Meats every day, making sure the plant complies with state regulations for safety and cleanliness, Flowers said.

Most of Project Meats customers are from the Billings and Huntley area, although some transport animals from as far away as Columbus and Forsyth, Flowers said.

The business has been growing steadily and Flowers is always on the lookout for ways to diversify. He cuts meat for a number of restaurants in the area, including The Feedlot

Steakhouse in Shepherd, the Blue Cat Café in Huntley, the Four Sisters Perk and Deli in Worden, and Charlie's Pizza in the Heights.

Project Meats processes 500 to 600 cattle, about one-third as many hogs and around 75 sheep per year. Hunting season is one of the busiest times of the year, when the coolers are filled with wild game.

Tanya handles the books, makes smoked products and is also heavily involved in new product development. Project Meats has kept busy developing different flavors of patties, sausage, jerky and other products.

At the Montana Meat Processors Association convention last year, Project Meats entered a number of its products in a competition, earning a fifth-place finish. While the competition was fun, the most useful part of the contest was the feedback from professors in meat science who critiqued the products.

"They would tell you what you could do to make it better, so it's really a good learning experience," Flowers said.