

A Cut Above:

Master Knife-Makers Find Niche in Meat Packing Industry

A meat-cutting robot and a chance meeting have dramatically altered the fortunes of two Saskatoon knife-makers.

Bob Robson and Eugene Schreiner have been making specialty hunting and filleting knives for many years – both individually and through their combined company called Bres Knives.

But it was a visitor at Robson's front door about three years ago that led to a brand new business opportunity. A man from the Quebec-based research and development agency CRIQ was holding Robson's ad from the Saskatoon yellow pages and two blades from a rib-pulling robot that had just been installed at

Intercontinental Packers (now Mitchell's Gourmet Foods). CRIQ worked with Mitchell's to develop the robot, the first of its kind in the world.

In a heavy French accent, the man asked Robson if he could sharpen the blades.

"I got hold of Gene and we sharpened them and as things progressed I was sharpening about eight to 10 blades a day for them," says Robson.

But the high carbon steel blades were inefficient, only getting 400 to 600 cuts between sharpenings.

"We told them we could build a better blade," says Schreiner, "so they told us to go ahead and make them a set and they'd try them."

Schreiner and Robson developed a set of stainless steel blades that could do 14,000 cuts per sharpening and the commercial side of Bres Knives was off and running. Bres Knives is now producing blades for a second robot at a meat packing plant in Quebec as well as "Denver" blades for plants that still do the rib-pulling process manually.

For competitive reasons, the master craftsmen are reluctant to divulge too much about the blades other than the fact they're made from surgical quality steel.

"We just make a superior blade that lasts longer and cuts longer," says Robson.

"It's not just what we make it out of, it's also knowing how to get the best out of your steel," adds Schreiner.

STEP is working with Bres Knives to identify potential markets for both the commercial and specialty divisions of the business. The custom-made knives feature intricate designs and are often ordered for presentations. They can also be found in high-end gift shops in places like Banff and Lake Louise. Their knives have been sold to buyers in Canada, Europe, the U.S. and Asia. One of Schreiner's knives was presented as a gift to the President of Kenya.

The pair teamed up several years ago to produce a line of knives combining Robson's craftsmanship with Schreiner's hand-drawn artwork etched into the blade. The knives sell for a base price of \$250, with some selling for \$500 to \$1,000.

As for the future, the two laid-back entrepreneurs are cautious about growing the commercial side of the business too fast and jeopardizing quality.

"We're growing with our market and we're going to have to adapt to that market," says Robson. "If we end up selling a thousand of these knives a week, we sure aren't going to be able to make a thousand, so we'll have to have some way to get around that. But I don't think we're going to turn away money!"



Bres Knives founders Robert Robson (left) and Eugene Schreiner have carved out a niche market in the knife manufacturing industry.