

Beef. . .

it's for sale at the ranch

Cattle photographed on the R.A. Brown Ranch.

By Susan Kanode

There are a lot of steps involved in getting beef from a producer's herd to the consumer's table.

With enhanced marketing opportunities through social media, it is quickly becoming a trend to streamline the process. Add in the complications presented by COVID-19 between packing plants, suppliers and distributors, and consumers are looking for products bought directly from producers across agriculture.

Raising a calf for harvest, rather than to be sold to a feeder presents a different set of challenges for producers, and some of those might be a surprise. For the consumer wanting to purchase beef and knowing where it comes from, it's an investment in nutrition through high-quality, flavorful beef.

The beef industry is pretty uncomplicated to consumers as long as they can go to a grocery store and pick up



The R.A. Brown Ranch expanded their seedstock and horse operation to include direct beef sales earlier this year. Brown says that this has also provided an opportunity to discuss the business of ranching and how cattle are raised and cared for on the ranch.

ground beef or a roast to feed their families. A lot of consumers have no idea how the beef gets to their table, nor do they care.

"It's been interesting to see how little people really know about beef and where it comes from," said Sara Green

of Southern Beef Company. "I feel like we have a good opportunity to educate people about what they are buying and that they can buy from people in their local community."

This year, with the coronavirus outbreak named COVID-19, packing



Southern Beef Company sells their beef locally in eighths, quarters, halves or whole sides. They have found not only a market, but a way to educate consumers on the beef industry and the healthy aspects of beef.

plants became hotbeds for the virus, and in some cases were shut down. America's meat supply was disrupted. Some ranchers already direct sales of their products in place. Others started exploring it as a new opportunity. American consumers began searching for alternate sources for food and social media became a resource to get producers and consumers together.

That all inspired Green to start Southern Beef Company as a partnership to sell "locally raised, locally enjoyed" beef. Also involved is her husband, Grady Green, who manages Draggin' M Ranch, a Brangus seed-stock producer, and the Graves family, including wife and mom Heather Graves, who is a nurse practitioner that uses her education to promote a healthy diet including beef.

Both families make their homes in El Dorado, Arkansas. Southern Beef

Company buys open first-calf heifers from the Draggin' M Ranch. They finish them out with a custom ration, have them harvested locally and sell them by the eighth, quarter, half or whole.

Green has done a lot of research into selling beef, relied on the experience of others, and done her homework. When it came time to price their product, they chose to simplify by charging a flat dollar amount per pound.

After shopping, they set their price then did a comparison for a quarter of beef bought retail and showed their potential customers how buying in bulk could save them money. While it has kept their profit margin low, they are focusing on the finish line and growing their business.

"We wanted to simplify pricing, so initially we picked a price. We knew our local community wouldn't pay a premium starting out. We feel like that will

change as we develop our market and start selling individual cuts. Then, we will price those accordingly."

Another producer delving into the direct marketing game is the legendary R.A. Brown Ranch of Throckmorton, Texas. Primarily known for their registered Angus, Red Angus and SimAngus cattle, the Brown family has been involved in beef production for more than 125 years. With each generation, their operation has grown and now, Tucker Brown, the sixth generation is bringing direct sales of beef to the table.

"My grandad told my dad that he could come back to the ranch, but he had to have a plan to help support another family," Brown said. "They have used that with each generation, and they told me the same thing. There is a need to expand and support another family."

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Happy Acres Beef is USDA certified and can sell individual cuts as well as beef in bulk. They sell locally and plan to expand to farmer's markets in the Dallas-Fort Worth area in the near future.

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They have been considering direct sales for the past two years. Then



Koby Long (l) and Ryon Cox (r) started Happy Acres Beef six years ago.

COVID-19 happened. Beef supplies were impacted and it opened an opportunity to sell beef directly. The ranch has always harvested their own product for their families and employees. They expanded on that for the first time this year.

Animals are grass-raised and ration-finished on the R.A. Brown Ranch. Along with Brown's family, he also called some of his classmates from Texas Christian University for advice. He is a graduate of their ranch management program.

"My mom and dad make a living marketing bulls, so we've channeled that experience," Brown said. "Some of my classmates have experience at this and they've given me sound advice. I've learned a lot."

Relying on advice from others has helped Ryon Cox jump in the water with both feet, as well. Cox is a graduate of Texas A&M University (TAMU) with a

bachelor's degree in agriculture education and a minor in agriculture economics. He also is a former Texas FFA president.

Cox grew up on a cow-calf operation in Mount Pleasant, Texas. They had commercial Beefmaster cattle and sold most of their calves as feeders. His family has a precast concrete business that Ryon and his sister, Charlotte now run.

When he was a sophomore at TAMU, he bought a set of recip heifers from Koby Long of Sulphur Springs, Texas. Long had a 1,350-pound steer that he needed to get rid of. Cox started thinking, called another state FFA officer whose family had a meat packing plant in Mineola, Texas, and the ball started rolling.

That was six years ago. Cox and Long, who has a degree in agricultural economics from Texas Tech, joined

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forces and formed Happy Acres Beef. They obtained USDA certification and now sell individual cuts as well as beef in bulk. They used their connections to produce a superior product and are now using them for marketing, too. Future plans are to sell Happy Acres Beef at farmer's markets in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Cox now has a registered Hereford operation. Being in the purebred business and selling heifers for show, he has staggered calving dates to provide cattle that fit show dates. That has come into play in the direct sales of beef, also.

The biggest challenge any producer faces is getting processing dates, then having cattle ready on those dates. Custom packing houses are backed up with orders and in many cases booked at least six months in advance.

"We have dates secured at two different plants," Brown said. "Some places are a year-out. That is a challenge that I wasn't expecting. Finishing cattle to match the processing has been a learning experience."

Cox's options are even more limited when they sell individual packages. If they sell beef by the quarter or half, they can utilize local processors. But for resale of retail cuts, the processor has

to be USDA certified.

Southern Beef Company uses a local processor and is selling locally with customers picking up their own beef. The R.A. Brown Ranch is using processors in Evant and Weatherford, Texas. Because of availability of finished cattle and getting processor dates, they are gradually moving into direct sales of beef. They will sell 10 animals their first year of business with plans of up to 20 per year.

"Our hope is that this will also help with the registered business," Brown said. "I think it will prove to those customers that the beef we are raising is in high demand, safe, healthy, and a nutritious protein source. Other producers will come to us for that same end product."

Adding direct sales of beef is another part of the ranching business. "This is an opportunity for people to see what is at the beginning of the food chain, ranchers working hard to keep our animals healthy, productive and raising great tasting beef," Brown added.

When COVID-19 reared its ugly head in March, it didn't take long to see oil prices and the stock market drop. Cattle prices followed and packing houses closed. Supplies at the grocery stores were short and American consumers were asking "Where's the beef?"

The supply chain might not have been completely broken, but definitely had some weak links in it. But for consumers to take advantage of buying locally, in bulk and getting quality beef, they also had to adjust. That created a shortage of retail freezers.

"The coronavirus has affected a lot of people negatively," Cox said. "It's been a blessing to us in building opportunities. Retaining ownership of cattle, getting the end product in the mouths of the consumers has turned into a 'know your rancher' campaign. I've given a lot of speeches. One of them is how marketing has changed the image of agriculture. This is one of those opportunities."

For all these producers, their diversification has started with family and friends and people in their communities. Happy Acres Beef has shipped some of their products, but the bulk of

their sales are to people they know. That requires building relationships, customer service and repeat business.

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Tucker Brown represents the sixth generation on the R.A. Brown Ranch. He is directing the ranch's beef sales division and is pictured with this wife, Karley.



Adam and Heather Graves and their family are part of the Southern Beef Company ownership team.



Grady and Sara Green and their family are co-owners of Southern Beef Company.

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It also leads to word-of-mouth advertising.

Southern Beef Company has taken their marketing a step further, offering recipes on social media and giving consumers opportunities to win gift certificates. They also ask consumers to share pictures of their food. Social media gives producers the chance to communicate directly with consumers.

Cox has been using primarily English bred cattle for his direct sales. He

has a goal of having beef available for sale year-round. In some cases that will mean buying feeder cattle to fill in the gaps. The concrete business gives him an edge as they manufacture a lot of water and feed troughs and he gets to talk to farmers and ranchers every day.

"The Hereford, Angus and those types of cattle are phenomenal for us. They are moderate and efficient in their size and in pen space." Cox said. "Big meat packers have been exposed publicly. Light has been shed on the supply chain and how it works. The end consumer can know their rancher and we

can provide high-quality product that meets their needs."

Hope for the future of the beef industry lies in progressive producers like these, willing to try something new, educate consumers and learn more about the product they are producing from the embryo all the way to the carcass.

"We have the opportunity to make this moment great for the beef industry," Green said. "Some producers might be intimidated, but this really is a chance to educate consumers, let them know more about beef and where it comes from."

Determining quantity of meat available for sale in a 1,200 lb. steer

By Igrow

If you are considering selling beef from the ranch, you will need to know how many pounds and the cuts you will have for sale and be able to discuss that with prospective customers. Following is information compiled by Igrow, the South Dakota Extension Service that provides valuable data and an explanation for sharing with consumers.

The yield of edible meat from a beef carcass often comes as a bit of a surprise, even to those that have had their own meat processed for years. Dressing percent—the percent of the live animal weight that becomes carcass weight, which for fed beef is usually around 62-64%. In other words, from a 1,200 pound steer, you can expect a 740 – 770 pound carcass.

But from that carcass there is another significant portion that will not end up in your freezer or in the meat case for consumers. The expected yield of retail cuts from beef carcasses ranges from approximately 55% to 75%, depending on the fatness and muscling of the animal, and the type of cuts produced. A typical 750 pound carcass with ½ inch of fat over the rib eye and average muscling of a 12-13 square inch rib eye will yield about 65% of the carcass weight as retail cuts (roasts and steaks) and lean trim. So, in other words, you start with a 1,200 pound steer, which has a dressing percent of 63%, so that you have a 750 pound carcass. From that you will get about 65% of the carcass weight, or roughly 490 pounds, as boneless, trimmed beef. If you look at that as a percentage of the live weight of the steer you started with, it is approximately 40% of the live weight.

Remaining components of the weight are fat trim and bone. Fat can be highly variable, but in the example used, fat would account for approximately 20% of the carcass weight or 12% of the live weight. Bone accounts for the other 15% of carcass weight. Recognize that these are average figures. These can vary considerably due to the fat and lean composition of the animal, as well as the trim level and methods of cutting the meat. However, it does demonstrate that it is a relatively small percentage of the live animal that ends up in the retail meat case as high quality edible meat. This is one factor that helps explain the difference between price per pound of a live animal and price per pound of retail beef.

If you look further at specific cuts of beef, it becomes even more apparent why some cuts are significantly higher priced in the retail meat case. Again using the example above, and cutting the carcass into primarily boneless steaks and roasts, the highest percentage of carcass weight, or 20-25%, actually ends up as lean trim. This 150 -185 pounds of lean trim would likely be packaged as ground beef. The next highest percentages would come from the chuck and round portions of the carcass. Boneless chuck roasts and steaks would typically account for 10-12% of carcass weight. Round roasts and steaks, including top round, eye of round, knuckle or sirloin tip, and bottom round would account for another 10-12%.

However, it is when we look at the "middle meats", those from the loin and rib, that the percentages are much less. Using a primarily boneless cutting method, you could take home strip loin, tenderloin, sirloin and rib eye steaks. All together, these steaks may add up to 10-12 % of carcass weight. But if you look at individual types of steaks, each one would be less than 3%, with tenderloins even less, at about 1.5% or less of carcass weight. What does that translate to? With a yield of 2.5% for strip loin steaks, that would be 18 pounds of strip steaks. For tenderloin steaks, or filets, a yield of 1.25% would give us 9 pounds of tenderloin steaks. Ever had a great grilled tri-tip? You'll only get two tri-tip roasts, each weighing about 1 ½ pounds from that 750 pound carcass.

So, to summarize: A 1,200 pound steer, ½ inch fat, average muscling, yields a 750 pound carcass. The 750 pound carcass yields approximately:

- 490 pounds boneless trimmed beef
- 150 pounds fat trim
- 110 pounds bone

A specific example of how the 490 pounds of boneless, trimmed beef could break out includes:

- 185 pounds lean trim, or ground beef
- 85 pounds round roasts and steaks
- 90 pounds chuck roasts and steaks
- 80 pounds rib and loin steaks
- 50 pounds other cuts (brisket, flank, short ribs, skirt steak)

Maybe this helps explain how the products from a 1,200 pound steer to fit in your freezer!