

Building better bovines

Grass-fed cattle business a family affair

By Judith McGinnis

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YOUNG COUNTY — Gathering the Warrens for a family portrait, mother Ann Warren is having a hard time coaxing her biggest kid, Rito, to line up for the shot. Husband Weldon has been able to lure him a bit with treats but after all, it is a beautiful spring day.

Finally Ann gives up and starts pushing the 2,000 pound Angus bull's flank, trying to get Rito to show his good side to the camera.

That's something few Texas ranchers would have the nerve to do.

"Really they're like pets," said 15-year-old daughter Erin, sweet-talking the black behemoth a bit. "Most of the time they'll just follow you around."

Operating among the trees and rocky pastures of the Palo Pinto hill country, Holy Cow Beef is both the future and the past of the beef industry.

With Americans growing increasingly concerned about hormones and antibiotics in the food chain, the Warrens produce grass-fed beef. Raised old-school, without hormone implants or antibiotic-treated feed, their steers are processed without spending a single day on a feed lot.

"We rotate pastures to give them a good nutritional balance in the types of grass they graze. The high mineral content of this soil really gives the beef a good flavor," said Weldon.

The Warrens came to Young County in 2003; Weldon had worked for a Dallas money market firm but wanted to get back to his ranching roots. With only 100 head in their cow/calf operation, the cattle are almost hand raised.

Because his animals don't get supplemental feed, when Weldon shows up with a bag of sweet cubes the Angus-Hereford crossbreeds follow him like puppies.

"My brother Martin ranches around Floydada. They still use hot shots (electric prods) to control cattle and round them up with horses," Weldon said. "We just kind of walk them into the trailer."

Reducing stress on cattle helps keep them healthier, he explained, and maintains consistent weight gain. Holy Cow steers are about 30 months old when processed, sufficient time to develop proper marbling, the intramuscular fat that gives beef its rich flavor.

Commercially raised cattle are brought onto feed lots at 15 to 20 months of age and put on corn-based feed to increase their weight.

Warren said the appearance of “all natural,” “pasture finished” and grass-fed beef in grocery stores has left many consumers confused about the difference between them. He points to liberal standards set by the USDA that allow producers to bring meat to market that isn’t as healthy as it might sound.

“Right now ‘all natural’ beef can be kept on hormones and antibiotics until 90 days before slaughter. ‘Pasture finished’ animals can be fed grain as long as they have access to a pasture,” he said. “That’s why the Texas Grassfed Livestock Alliance and the American Grassfed Association are still pressing to narrow the definition of grass-fed; the USDA says hormones and antibiotics are OK, but we don’t allow it on anything we raise.”

Through the TGLA, small grass-fed operations like Holy Cow have been able to negotiate purchase agreements with Whole Foods Markets, but only by meeting the store’s stringent standards. Now Warren sends six steers a week to be processed straight from the pasture and on into Metroplex stores.

Holy Cow Beef is also available at Sunshine Natural Foods in Wichita Falls and by direct order (940-521-0595 or HolyCowBeef@yahoo.com).

Back at the Warren home, a tender Holy Cow pot roast is on the lunch menu. For those lucky enough to remember what beef tasted like when Texas families raised their own, the rich flavor is deliciously familiar.

Erin, her brothers J.R., 13, and Timothy, 12 have been raised on raw milk from the family cow, eggs from their own chickens, grass-fed beef and no genetically modified foods.

“It’s a good life. We work hard and play hard and raise a product we’re proud of,” said Weldon Warren, looking out across a pasture where his wife, children and cattle were taking in the sunshine. “Doing the right thing is always worth it.”

