



Allowed to Shine

Consistent approach during change of ownership keeps top-quality beef on track.

by **Miranda Reiman**

Unknown" is usually a negative term in the cattle business given all that could go wrong with undisclosed genetics, background, management and health history.

Tim Miller, West Point, Neb., just tries to use what he does know to make the most of those mystery cattle.

"All I do is allow cattle to fully express their genetic potential by keeping them on a consistent plane of nutrition," he explains. To enhance beef quality, he says producers must understand "compensatory gain does not create marbling. We don't know exactly when marbling begins to take place, so it would be best to never compromise an animal's nutrition or health throughout the course of its life."

The result of putting that into play? One harvest group last year went 100% USDA Choice and Prime, with 60% accepted for the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand. Another



finished at 96.7% Choice and Prime. Results are hard to predict because of the range of cattle Miller backgrounds and feeds, but he always aims to hit high marks.

Miller owns 65 Angus-based cows, but his main enterprise involves managing stockers.



► Clay Kuchera's herd features the Angus breed because of the genetic diversity it offers, he says. "With as many Angus cattle as there are in the country, it's almost like you can crossbreed your Angus on your Angus," Kuchera says.

A recent, more complex venture included purchasing bred heifers from the Kuchera family of Rose, Neb. Their progeny comprised the group that hit 60% CAB. Although buyers always seem to "pay a premium" for the Kucheras' calves, the Sandhills-area producers had no idea the finished cattle were capable of that quality level.

Selling through local auction markets had not fostered information sharing back from the buyers. Still, Clay and Hilary Kuchera say they tried to produce what should be attractive to buyers.

"Uniformity has always been on our list," Clay Kuchera says. "You've got to have load lots of uniform cattle."

The 300-cow, mostly Angus herd is managed on land that Kuchera's parents, Mike and Janet, ranched before he returned from college. They also lease adjacent land from the University of Nebraska Foundation.

Kuchera says beef quality has never been a narrow focus, but he figures it comes with the emphasis on consistency and low-input, moderate-framed females.

"We don't grow any feedgrain or alfalfa here, so they have to work," he says. Rather than graze their subirrigated lowlands, the Kucheras harvest forage for winter feeding. To avoid high protein costs they have developed "middle-of-the-road" cattle that thrive on hay with as little supplementation as possible.

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He has apparently found the right matings, buying bulls from local suppliers and retaining females — at least that's what Miller found out when he calved those purchased heifers in March and April 2007.

"The secret to marbling is that there is no secret," Miller says. "We already know it's a combination of genetics and management." The genetics came from Kuchera, and from there on, Miller's care helped them shine.

The cow-calf pairs grazed smooth brome and bluestem-trefoil pastures until fall, and calves started on a growing ration of corn silage and alfalfa just before fenceline weaning.

"They took right off on feed with very little bawling," he says.

The calves moved to a finishing ration the following January and were harvested last summer at 14-15 months of age.

"I figured their average daily gain (ADG) through their entire lives was 2.5 pounds (lb.) per day," Miller says. "My advice for anyone who wants to feed for quality is to

concentrate on a level plane of nutrition early in a calf's life."

Pastures with a mix of cool- and warm-season grasses provide steady feed throughout the growing season.

"I try to focus on rotational grazing, fly control and clean water; nothing special, just common sense," he says. Since the cattle are used to being moved from pasture to pasture, they also become very docile.

Miller tries to continue that low-stress handling by keeping them at home for finishing.

"Weaning causes enough stress on a calf," he explains. The semi-sale barn-semi-feedlot routine causes a lot of "stress that can be avoided," he says.

These are lessons Miller "learned by observation" as a lifelong cattleman growing up with a dad and grandfather in the business.

"I've been involved in all aspects of beef production from calving to finishing, so I tend to look at the whole picture when it comes to producing high-quality beef," he says.

When Miller has cattle that could qualify for CAB, he typically sells on a value-based grid. This year's narrowing of the Choice/Select spread and the uncertain economy

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figure into his marketing plans, but they don't change his end goal.

"We are in this business to produce beef, so why not try to produce the highest-quality beef possible?" Miller asks. "There are many reasons for people to bad-mouth the beef industry, but it's hard to do after you've tasted a CAB steak."

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