

Diversifying with Locker Beef



PHOTOS BY KIM HOLT

Northwest breeders use locker-beef opportunities to help diversify and market their chosen breed.

by *Kim Holt*

Southwest Idaho's Dennis Boehlke and western Oregon's Troy and Laurie Van Roekel are dedicated, long-time Angus breeders and western Angus organization leaders who continually strive to raise cattle that are productive from pasture to plate. Lately, it's the latter both have placed special emphasis on in order to diversify and expand marketing opportunities while supplying customers with great-tasting, homegrown locker beef.

"My dad bought his first Angus heifers from my grandfather in 1953," says Dennis, a fourth-generation Angus breeder who runs Bell Key Angus with his brother, Jim, just south of Nampa, Idaho.

The Boehlke brothers annually market 30 bulls and a handful of replacement females, both privately and through select consignment sales. All Bell Key females have been artificially bred since 1979. Dennis says they continually strive to add more thickness

► **Above:** Bell Key Angus Ranch's Dennis Boehlke is using locker beef to keep his yearling bull supply in line with demand, and also to weed out all carriers of genetic defects. He tested 35 head in his herd this year for genetic defects. "I'm just going to clean it out in one go-around and go on," he says.

► Bell Key's customer base has been developed primarily by word of mouth. Dennis' niece and neighbor's daughter found customers at Hewlett Packard, Title 1 and Simplot for him. To help build the locker-beef business, Dennis bought this 11-by-22-foot walk-in cooler-freezer combination in partnership with a neighbor who raises premium pork.



and fleshing ability to their registered cattle. They started focusing on locker beef in 2008 for several reasons.

"We had a carryover of yearling bulls," Dennis explains, "so I decided to cut the bottom one-third of bull calves because I didn't want that to happen again."

Bell Key also wants to be sure their herd is free of carriers of genetic defects.

"I believe one way to handle that is to cull it out rather than dump it on the commercial market," Dennis says.

The Boehlkes were also encouraged by neighbors who had eaten Bell Key beef they had purchased or traded for labor or feedgrains.

"They just rant and rave about our meat," Dennis says. "That is what got us going on locker beef, too. It's a marketing tool. It diversifies us."

Learning by doing

This past year Bell Key sold 20 head of cattle for locker beef, a substantial increase from the several head they were accustomed to feeding on an annual basis. While a few were sold on Craigslist, most were marketed through word of mouth.

"Neighbors and relatives took quite a few of them," Dennis confirms.

Bell Key sells quarters, halves and whole carcasses, advertising its locker beef simply as "homegrown Angus beef." Customers can choose a steer or heifer and the weight they most prefer. Bell Key charges customers on the animal's hanging weight. At 14 months old, the animals weigh about 1,300 pounds (lb.), dress a 750- to 850-lb. carcass and yield at least 60% or better.

Dennis delivered up to five head at a time to his processor, who harvested and then aged the carcasses for 21 days. He admits that marketing locker beef is quite a bit of work. To make it easier, Dennis paid his processor for all cutting and wrapping charges up front. The customer then just paid Dennis a flat price for the beef, with the harvest fee and cutting and wrapping added in.

There's no doubt that buying beef a quarter, half or whole at a time can be expensive, and customers often need to save the money ahead of time.

"With this downturn market, we thought we had more people lined up originally than we did," Dennis relays. "But I think we'll get return customers every year, and that's a big deal, especially if their friends get one, too."

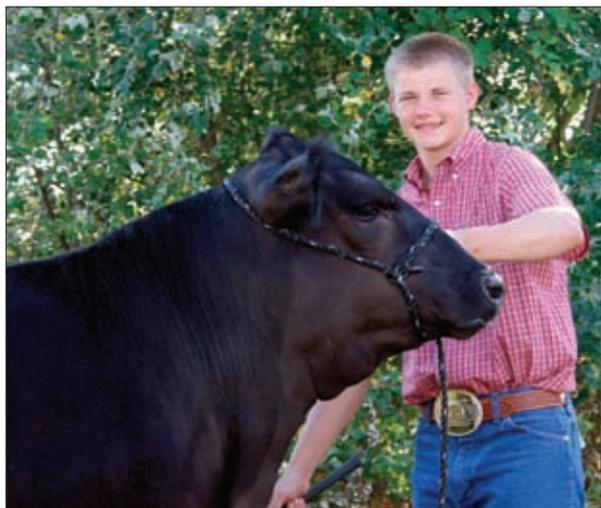
From this past year's experience, Dennis believes that customers appreciate extra service. Oftentimes he'd pick up beef from the processor; he'd have it waiting for customers who only needed to travel a short distance out of town to pick up their beef

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF VAN ROEKEL FAMILY

► **Above:** Longtime Angus breeders Laurie and Troy Van Roekel of Van Roekel Angus find that locker-beef sales fit their family's busy lifestyle.



► **Left:** Nathan, Drew and Logan (pictured here) Van Roekel have grown up in state and national junior Angus programs. For the last 11 years, the three brothers have either won grand champion, reserve grand champion, or both titles in their county fair's market steer show. "These steers are out of our own genetics that we raised here on our farm," their mom, Laurie, proudly says.

Tips of the trade

Dennis Boehlke and Laurie Van Roekel give these locker-beef tips:

- **Plan ahead.** Schedule the harvest date to coincide with the finished weight of the animal.
- **Market within several months of harvest.** Let customers know when the cattle on feed will be finished. Oftentimes they'll need a ballpark estimate so they can save up the money and/or plan for freezer space.
- **Be helpful.** Dennis and Laurie help customers better understand the basics of cutting and wrapping. Dennis will make recommendations on cuts that he knows people may not be accustomed to cooking anymore or would instead have as hamburger. Laurie often calls in cutting and wrapping instructions for customers like doctors who are busy professionals.
- **Be flexible.** Customers who work 8-to-5 may not have the time to pick up their beef at the packing plant during working hours, and/or they may rather have it delivered by the producer. Others would rather pick it up themselves at the ranch or farm to see the cattle and country. The Van Roekels own a large chest freezer and Boehlke a walk-in cooler to help facilitate this service.
- **Keep it simple.** Laurie says selling beef by quarters, halves or wholes is easiest. Dennis recommends just 1-pound (lb.) hamburger packages.
- **Establish a waiting list/think about a down payment.** If customers are new, a down payment may be in order. Laurie requires a down payment when a new customer picks out a calf at weaning for her family to custom-feed.
- **Look for a niche.** See what niche market you can fill in your area. Living near a metro area as the Van Roekels do, there are people who are willing to pay more for a high-quality product and customer service.

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from his 11-by-22-foot walk-in cooler after work hours.

“That’s handy for them,” he says.

He also believes customers like picking up their beef from the actual source.

“You can look right across the fence and see the herd you got the beef from,” he points out. And they know he can trace the animal back through records and pedigrees.

Dennis admits he’s continuing to learn how to best market locker beef. But he views it as another marketing tool and revenue source for the Bell Key operation, while supplying consumers with a really good product.

A good fit

Further west, the Troy and Laurie Van Roekel family of Van Roekel Angus Ranch, North Plains, Ore., have been very successful with their registered Angus cattle on both junior and senior levels of shows and sales. However, as their family’s three boys have gotten older and busier with three sports, school activities and college, there isn’t as much time and labor available to show cattle or raise and market registered bulls.

That is one of the reasons why this family shifted gears to focus on the steer side of things. They still sell replacement females, but market locker beef and club calves instead of bulls. This has also lowered costs and provided them with a better return on their cattle.

“We’ve had a lot of people who want homegrown beef — they want to know how it is fed, where it is grown,” Laurie explains. “We did the whole show thing and are seeing a different aspect to it now. It’s a little change of pace versus dealing with purebred breeders. You’re dealing with a different clientele.”

Laurie and Troy both grew up with cattle, and their sons are fourth-generation beef producers. Similar to Boehlke, they have stayed involved in their state and western Angus groups and activities, including being past advisors for the Oregon Junior Angus Association. Van Roekel cattle haven’t followed fads, but have

been bred for maternal as well as carcass traits.

“Not only could you show our cattle, but they had to perform on the other end, too,” Laurie comments.

The Van Roekels live about 20 miles west of Portland, a prime area to educate consumers about the benefits of beef. Like Boehlke, nearly all of their locker-beef sales are through word of mouth, especially the health-care field in which a friend works.

Laurie says they will take beef orders and custom-feed calves that are sold on hanging weight. Some customers want no grain, others just 30 days of grain and some want their calf all grain

fed. Laurie says they do try to educate customers — who may have other notions about the effects of grain feeding on the environment and their health — about the wholesome benefits of beef and the taste benefits from feeding animals grain instead of just grass.

“You try to fit the niche — there is that population of people who believe that lean is better,” she says. And there are those who don’t want calves to have had any antibiotics. “We try to keep it as natural as possible.”

Lean or not, the Van Roekels have never received complaints about their meat, and their doctor customers often come back and rave about the results. Laurie reminds them that the beef is grain-fed.

The Van Roekels have worked on their genetics for many years, and carcass contests have shown how their cattle perform. They can track and trace their cattle through health and ancestry records, and Laurie keeps buyers in a notebook and on a computer.

As a whole, she has been able to educate customers the past five years on what it takes to produce good beef. She says that some customers think their beef is expensive; but they better understand after she explains the beef production process.

“People are so far removed from where their food comes from,” Laurie comments. “You can always raise it less expensive, but do you want that quality of product?”

All in all, the Van Roekels are finding that locker beef is a good fit for their family’s lifestyle. It gives them a reason to stay in the Angus business as both Laurie and Troy couldn’t imagine being without the cattle.

“We’ve had a lot of people who want homegrown beef — they want to know how it is fed, where it is grown.”

— Laurie Van Roekel

Byproducts cut feed costs

Being located in the seed corn capital of the world affords Idaho’s Bell Key Angus Ranch some breaks when it comes to feed resources. Brothers Dennis and Jim Boehlke, who also help their valley supply 95% of the world’s sweet corn seed, utilize the byproducts of regular field corn and seed corn. They can pasture cows on cornstalks and bean stubble until mid-January and chop the “bull” rows of seed corn for silage.

Seed corn needs to be cross-pollinated, so there are four “cow” rows of corn topped by hand labor to every one “bull” row. As the pollinator, the bull row pollinates itself and the other four rows, but it is only utilized for livestock feed. Dennis has been known to chop the neighbor’s bull rows in trade for a half of beef.

Bell Key calves go into the feedlot right after weaning where they’re started on homegrown feedstuffs and byproducts that include corn silage, alfalfa and a ration of white milo, barley and cull peas for protein. The milo is half the ration.

“We ran into the white milo by accident,” Dennis says. His neighbor, who raises pork, was feeding the white milo, which is a hybrid. The Boehlkes planted several acres of this grain sorghum so they’d have enough to finish their 2009 locker-beef calves.

“The fat is white, so the marbling shows up better,” Dennis explains. “It’s just a beautiful carcass.” It also may be helping the grade on the steers, he’s been told.

The feed value of grain sorghum is similar to corn; the grain has more protein and fat than corn, but is lower in vitamin A. When compared with corn on a per-pound basis, grain sorghum feeding value ranges from 90% to nearly equal to corn. It’s also highly palatable to livestock.

