

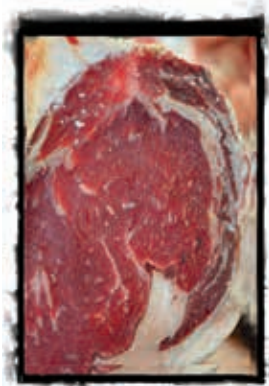
LOCAL FLAVOR

*Ward family creates pasture-to-plate
success story from the ground up.*

by Joann Pipkin



PASTURE IMAGES COURTESY OF VALLEY OAKS ANGUS



Some might say it has everything to do with location. Others might say it was sheer luck.

Deep down, the Ward family of Valley Oaks Angus knows having a quality product ultimately deserves all the kudos for helping them grow their operation into a vertically integrated farm-to-table success story.

Owned by the Ward family, Valley Oaks Angus and its sister enterprises, Valley Oaks Feeders and Valley Oaks Steak Co., bring beef production full circle in the shadows of Kansas City, near Oak Grove, Mo.



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Putting pieces in place

Some 25 years ago David and Sandra Ward, along with their children — Tony, Clayton and Cassandra — operated Valley Oaks Angus, a 150-head registered Angus farm. The family marketed beef in halves and quarters privately to friends and neighbors. They often toyed with turning the enterprise into a full-scale business. In 2016, they purchased two grocery stores — Sunfresh Markets in Grain Valley and Oak Grove — and began selling their beef to those stores in March 2017.

Today, the family's south farm near Clinton is home to about 1,000 commercial Angus cows in addition to the registered operation near Oak Grove.

"It started with the feedlot," explains Devon Lynn, Valley Oaks marketing manager. "We were taking all the steers off of the commercial operation and filling our barns. When we decided to up production, that's when we started looking for other cattle to fill in the gaps."

A state-of-the-art feedlot is located near Lone Jack and houses the cattle under roof. With the help of engineering and in-house fans, animals are maintained at a continuously comfortable temperature during the feeding and finishing phases. The building's design helps provide a stress-free environment, which the Wards say ensures high-quality beef in the end.

After encountering some hurdles when it came time to secure a processor for their beef, the Wards set sail in uncharted water.

In 2016, the family embarked on building a processing plant, owned by its sister business Valley Oaks Steak Co. Processing 20 head of cattle a week at the start, the facility doubled that number in two short years. A planned expansion project will add about 38,000 square feet of refrigeration in addition

to a cutting floor, shipping area and harvest facility, explains David. At capacity, he expects the facility to process as many as 200 to 300 head per day.

Thinking outside the box

It's not every day when an Angus breeder opts to build his own processing plant. From regulations to reams of paperwork for certification, calling the venture outside the box would be an understatement.

"We're doing what a lot of people talk about doing," says Jeff

Gooden, who manages Valley Oaks Feeders.

It took a year to receive certification for the processing plant and five months for labels to be approved, but the first steers were harvested at Valley Oaks in February 2017.

Hours upon hours of research and Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) training were key to

helping the Valley Oaks crew lock this piece of their puzzle in place.

"David and I visited smaller packing plants, too, just to see how it all worked," Jeff explains.

Through a federal grant, an on-site USDA meat inspector monitors processing protocols. Devon says no harvesting, shipping or even labeling can take place unless the inspector is present.

The "build it and they'll come" concept might work in the movies, but the Wards know developing and nurturing new relationships with their customers and local community is a constant process.

Relationships fuel growth

Even though starting with a quality product was paramount in the development of their business, securing a relationship with a food distributor



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would be necessary to grow their operation.

A distribution agreement with Scavuzzo's Foods in Kansas City, Kan., has moved the Ward's beef into restaurants, casinos and grocery outlets in the area.

"The limitation that we have right now is just getting (our product) out to the market," says Jake Huddleston, Valley Oaks plant and national sales manager. "We had to find a partnership that really worked well for us."

The relationship with Scavuzzo's has actually been 25 years in the making, says Tony Ward. "They're family-owned, family-operated. We're all family-owned and -operated. So, it all tied together really easily."

The Scavuzzo's distribution agreement will likely call for more product. Also, the Wards are adamant about working with their local community for assistance in all facets of the production chain.

"We grow the corn. We feed the animals. We process them. We take the manure and spread it back on our fields," Devon says.

From purchasing hay to fill forage needs to buying wood chips and sawdust for bedding, Valley Oaks thrives on networking with local farmers and business owners.

Nurturing relationships with other cattlemen is key, too, as Valley Oaks' distribution needs grow, Tony says.

Valley Oaks cooperates with its customers through a buy-back program on steers sired by the farm's bulls. Those cattle then enter Valley Oaks Feedlot and eventually are processed as meat to be sold through Valley Oaks Steak Co.

"We look at the buy-back program as a partnership with our customers," says Kyle Lynn, manager, Valley Oaks Angus. "We're working together. We want them to know how their cattle are doing just as much as we need to know. That way, everyone can work together."

Working with their local community is good for



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business, too, Jake says. "We've calmed a lot of fears about water issues and plant operations when it comes to our impact on the environment," he notes. "We're trying to keep the loop as closed and tight and local as possible in all aspects of the business. That way, it keeps not just our business footprint small, but also our carbon footprint and our impact on the environment."

Still, local support doesn't stop at the farm's front gate. The entire Valley Oaks operation cooperates with school and agriculture groups of all kinds, conducting facility tours and educational events.

"The meat has been huge," Tony says. "The community is coming out in support. Our retail shop is open Thursdays and Fridays, and there's a line out the door every time. Now, we're a destination."

Technology & genetics

Yes, convenience counts. However, the Wards know a quality eating experience is what keeps customers coming back.

"We're doing what I would consider a hybrid blend of old-world and new-world technology when it comes to meat production," Jake explains.

Valley Oaks hangs the carcass on the rail for seven days following harvest to help concentrate the meat's flavors, and then combines it with a wet-aging process for the remainder of the 21 days.

"You don't have any more yield loss, and the tenderness continues to develop," Jake says.

Combined with the low-stress environment and genetic package the Wards have put together, the results leave customers coming back for more. Yet it all starts on the other side of the gate at Valley Oaks Angus.

"It's pretty amazing to see how much a breeding decision can impact the final product," Kyle says. "We definitely look at carcass values more than we used to. We were always trying to produce the

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most functional, phenotypically correct females and bulls we could. And now that we've started selling meat, we have to look at carcass weight a little more and marbling and ribeye."

Kyle says how an animal is fed also plays a role in the way it finishes on the rail, but genetics and even environment cannot be discounted.

"We breed for good carcass values," he says. "At the same time, though, you can't focus on one trait. We still have customers that want to keep females out of their bulls, so we have to focus on feet, structure and milk, too."

Often, Kyle and Jeff will visit with customers before purchasing their calves for the operation's buy-back program.

"We can see firsthand what our bulls are doing, what they're doing right and what we need to improve on," Kyle says. "Then, the next breeding season we can make adjustments. I can also look at our kill data and know exactly what we're doing."

Devon says Valley Oaks tracks its cattle from the farm through processing. Animals are identified with electronic identification tags (eID) upon arrival. Carcass data are provided to cooperators free of charge.

A low-stress environment completes the picture of this pasture-to-plate success story.

"(The animals) are not getting hauled to be harvested," Jeff explains. "They don't get their adrenaline flowing."

With the cattle out of the elements and maintained at a constant temperature in the barns, Tony says they tend to stay more relaxed for the six to eight months of the finishing phase.

"The pens are all small enough that we can

walk on foot through them," he says. "There's no horseback, no pushing them with ATVs."

"Our stress level is zero," David reiterates. "We have no trucking or anything else that gets them stressed out."

Technology, genetics and environment combine to create a superior-quality meat product, the Wards say.

While much of today's beef marketing focuses on a consumer's eating experience, Jake says very little focuses on the quality of the product. "What we're actually doing is focusing

on the real quality markers, flavor, tenderness, to actually make a superior product."



The Valley Oaks team includes (front row, from left) Jake Huddleston, Devon Lynn, Kyle Lynn, (back row, from left) Clayton Ward, Tony Ward, Jeff Gooden and David Ward.

Completing the picture

It takes vision and true grit to put all of the pieces together of a family-owned, vertically integrated beef business.

"There's not too many people that have the intestinal fortitude to actually take it and run with it and make it work," Jake credits.

A self-professed risk-taker, David admits he's always got a plan B in his hip pocket.

For David and the rest of the Valley Oaks crew, their pasture-to-plate business has been about nurturing that quality niche they planted decades ago.

"It's an ever-evolving industry," Jake says. "It goes back to the passion that everybody in here has. This is what we've all dedicated our lives to."

As Tony puts it, "We've got to build the name, build the brand, build the program." **AJ**

Editor's Note: Joann Pipkin is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Republic, Mo. Other than pasture images, she took the photos in this article.