

NICHE MARKETING

Mike and Cathy Conlin offer the customers convenience and a quality Angus beef product.

by Joan L. Ista



Mike and Cathy Conlin and their children are newcomers to the angus business but fast learners.

It wasn't planned. Mike and Cathy Conlin, rural Topeka, Kan., say they just stumbled into the niche market that earns them a premium for their cull cattle.

Friends asked them to sell a side of beef and other buyers followed. Two years ago they had more customers than meat and the six animals they butchered in January all were sold to previous buyers.

By marketing the meat directly to the consumer, the Conlins also eliminate shrink and the commission they would pay if the animals were sold through the salebarn.

The location of the Conlin farm is an asset for their niche business. All of the buyers are from the Topeka area. "Most people who buy our meat don't have a strong agricultural background. They're very enchanted about buying something that's fresh and implant free," Conlin explains.

The Conlins, who have a 30-head purebred Angus herd, keep 20 percent of their bulls and half of their females each year. "The remainder go into one pound packages," Conlin says.

Originally they sold the beef at the average liveweight price paid for steers that week. today, however, they believe their product is above average and price accordingly. Cull animals sold as butvher bef in 1992 avberaged 85 cents a pound. the price is equally acceptable to the customer. "Most people are very happy with the price," Conlin says.

To reduce customer misunderstanding, beef is priced by the pound in the package instead of liveweight. Few of the Conlin's customers have large freezers and most of the meat is sold as a side or a mixed side. Buyers of a mixed side must find a buyer for the other side.

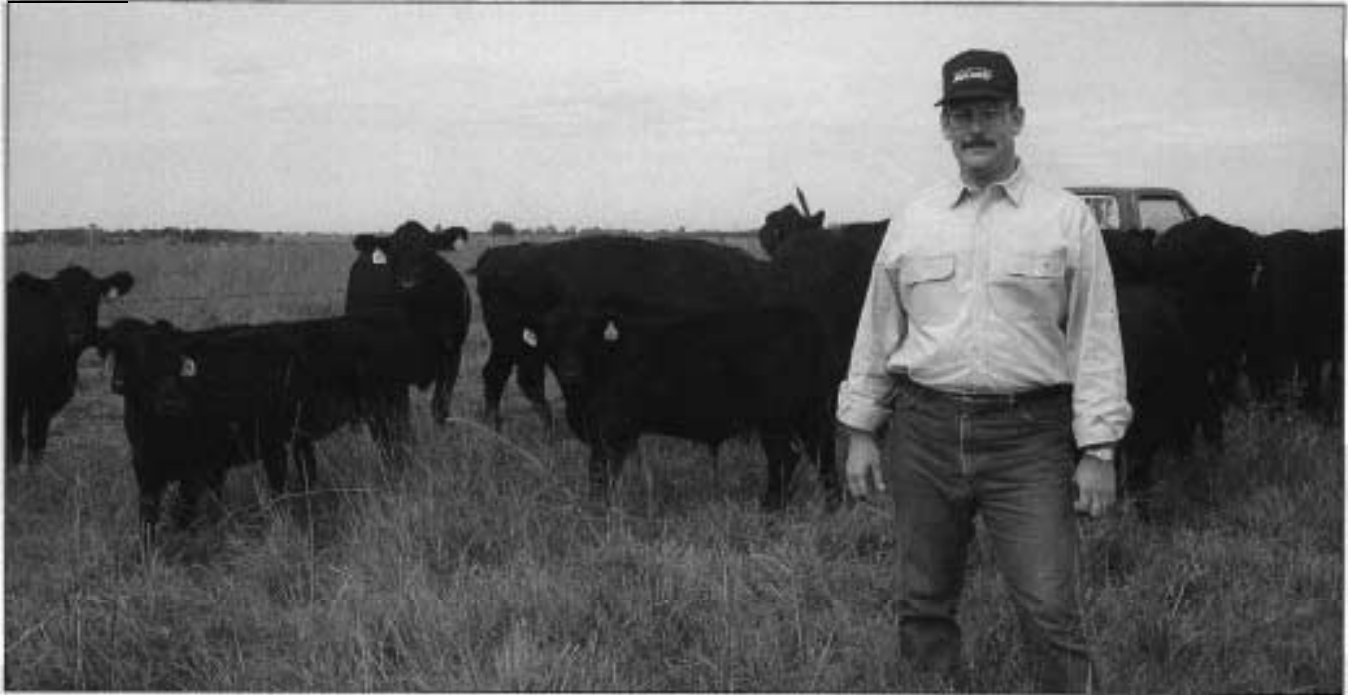
The Conlins say many of their customers are unfamiliar with the cuts that make up the animal. "We have had people say they want the side all cut into steak," Conlin says.

That's where a good locker plant comes in, he says. "Davis Locker, Overbrook, Kan., (where the animals are processed) is tremendous in helping customers decide what they want. He walks them through the process. Do they want the outside fat trimmed? What percentage of the meat do they want ground for hamburger?"

Conlin says the beef he sells has more fat than that

sold at the grocery store but he believes it's also more tender and flavorful. "We haven't had any complaints about the quality of our meat," he says.

Convenience is a part of the package the Conlins offer their meat customers. They deliver the animal to the locker where it is



Mike Conlin manages a 30-head purebred Angus herd in northeastern Kansas.

processed red and packaged according to the customer's wishes. They also pick up the packaged meat and deliver it to the customer's home.

"Basically it's effortless. All they have to do is write me a check," Conlin explains.

The locker plant also provides grading and dress-out information that helps the Conlins in breeding their cattle. Animals have an average dress-out of 63 percent.

Animals are weaned at 205 days of age and cull animals fed out on the farm on a ration of milo, corn, molasses, oats and alfalfa pellets. Conlin feeds grain every evening and hay free choice. Animals are not implanted with a growth hormone. When slaughtered in mid-January, they have an average daily gain of 2.6 pounds. This year animals were processed at 15 months of age and weighed an average of 1,170 pounds.

The Conlins are newcomers to the cattle business. A Topeka native, Mike became acquainted with Angus cattle when he spent summers at his grandparent's farm when a boy. When Mike and Cathy purchased 80 acres of pasture they bought an Angus cow to graze the land.

The one cow soon became three, then four. Mike met Angus breeders who explained expected progeny differences (EPDs) and the importance of culling. Cathy took an artificial insemination (AI) course at KABSU, Manhattan, and began to AI the cows.

"I wasn't real interested in this project of Michael's until I took the AI class," Cathy says. Cathy was the only woman in the class and felt she had to prove her competence in AI. However, her training as a nurse made her a quick learner.

"I was familiar with the terminology. Using the instruments was easy for me. It's just like giving shots," Cathy says.

Cathy says their cows aren't as tolerant as those at KABSU. The first year she struggled to get their four cows bred artificially. She only had a 50 percent success rate and the calving season stretched from February through June.

Her success rate jumped to 100 percent the second year, when she AI bred the animals both morning and night after they were detected in heat. Today she has an average AI success rate of 80 percent.

"I really like AIing," she says. And now she's just as enthused about the cows as Mike.

Cathy and Mike work as a team to breed the animals in March and April. Heifers are bred before cows so they can be watched more closely when calving and assisted as necessary.

Cows and heifers are synchronized with MGA and Lutalyse to calve in 21 days. They're fed MGA for 14 days and then injected with prostaglandin 17 days after their last day on MGA.

Although a majority of the animals come into estrus six to seven days later, Mike puts K-Marr patches on the backs of the cows and heifers so he can more easily detect them in heat.

Cathy AI's the animals once, then a clean up bull is used. Because both Mike and Cathy work off the farm, calving ease is an important trait in selecting bulls. Cathy is a registered nurse in Topeka and Mike owns and operates Jayhawk Drug in Topeka. "We both work eight hour days off the farm. We want to be able to leave in the morning and not worry about a disaster while we're gone. We've used a lot of low birthweight bulls," Mike says. Still, when possible, he likes to couple that low birthweight with growth and milking ability.

He tries to use a proven bull and checks to see how many daughters it has produced and the number of herds it has been used in.

The Conlins say they're still learning about cattle and farming. "We have stumbled; we have made mistakes. We have bred some things we shouldn't have," Mike says.

However, they appreciate the help of neighbors, the Extension office and area Angus breeders. They want to continue to improve their herd and are looking forward to increasing sales breeding stock.

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