

# Going **FULL** Circle

*Genetics, technology and environment all work together at Valley Oaks Farms.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*



It's arguably the simplest of shapes — no lines, no edges, no corners. Simple doesn't mean easy, however, as anyone who's tried to draw a perfect circle knows. From the size of the shape itself to the smoothness of its borders, making anything come full circle can be a challenge.

Valley Oaks Farms is built on the concept of this “perfect circle.” They strive to take their customers on a journey through the entire cycle of the beef production chain, a journey marked by its complex simplicity.

The mission started in 1992 when David and Sandra Ward purchased land and a cattle herd in Knob Noster, Mo. Years ticked by, and the herd decreased in size to ease management. When the couple's children (Tony, Clayton and Cassie) and their families returned to the operation, things began to grow again as they sought to create a vertically integrated business.

Jeff Gooden serves as the general manager, working closely with the Ward family to oversee the registered Angus and commercial herds, as well as the family's string of show cattle. In its entirety, the farm is home to more than 2,000 head spread out over three main properties that comprise of nearly 3,000 acres.

Headquarters for the Missouri farm sits between the towns of Grain Valley and Oak Grove. It's here that Gooden's office is located, and here that he has the chance to do his part to draw the complete circle of cattle production.

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## Starting strong

Since joining the Valley Oaks team six years ago, Gooden has made it his mission to find cattle that best suit the Missouri environment and surpass production goals set by the Ward family.

He splits his breeding decisions between the herds — show cattle are bred to meet the current demands of the ring, registered females are bred to produce bulls that can be sold in one of two sales a year to commercial customers, and calves from the commercial females are often destined for the Valley Oaks feedlot.

No matter where the calves' future lies, Gooden says he wants the animals to be something he's proud bears the Valley Oaks name.

"What our theory is, is trying to breed good cattle," he says.

There's a serious emphasis on carcass quality, but Gooden dedicates a lot of time to making sure cattle leaving the farm stand on a good set of feet and legs and match his idea of a phenotypically pleasing animal. While each breeding season the operation works to pair bulls and females with complementary expected progeny differences (EPDs), Gooden says the best cattle are first identified in the pasture.

"You have to be able to go out and like the cows that you got in your herd," he explains. "My theory is you can have all the EPDs in the world, but you still got to be able

to go out and look at them every day."

In Gooden's time at Valley Oaks, herd numbers have increased. Bringing cattle in from all over the country, he says it's typically easy to identify which females will make it in the humid, fescue-laden pastures of Missouri.

When they purchase new registered cattle, he gives them two to three years to acclimate to the environment. If the registered females can't produce a calf worthy of staying on the farm or making it through the sale ring, they're transitioned to the commercial herd or sold.

Gooden says the American Angus Association's work on projects like the new Hair Shed EPD make it easier to identify those top-performing females. As a seedstock breeder, Gooden says he appreciates the breadth of genetic tools and selection indexes he's presented with. It's another piece of the puzzle in terms of finding cows that solve problems rather than create them.

In Gooden's mind, the way to sort off underperforming cows from those excelling also comes with monitoring calf progress at weaning and the females' ability to breed back.

"You have to sort through them pretty hard to get the ones that you need," Gooden says. "Adaptability is really critical. What works in Missouri doesn't work in Montana, or what maybe works in Montana doesn't work here."

The Ward family, with the help of Gooden, have

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## Encircling a New Element

*Valley Oaks Farms purchases bull stud, finding a new way to continue serving the beef industry.*

What started out as a joking text from Jeff Gooden to Tony and David Ward about the purchase of a local bull stud turned into the latest business venture for Valley Oaks Farms.

The property is tucked away in Warsaw, Mo., and though Gooden didn't imagine it would become a reality, he says he's excited about the new facility.

Currently, the stud is selling a majority of its semen internationally. It's an exciting market, but Gooden says he's looking forward to focusing more on domestic sales.

There's a large focus on muscle shape and longevity in the international market, but bulls at the stud are managed the same no matter where their semen will be shipped. Since their breeding program finds the balance of phenotype and genotype, Gooden says the bulls from the farm are more than capable of serving a wide range of customers.

With the fast-paced nature of the beef industry, the bull stud will allow the farm to highlight up-and-coming bulls from Valley Oaks Farms, showcase quality genetics from other local breeders, and help Gooden and his team stay ahead of the curve.

Gooden admits the new venture has challenged him in all that's required from a management standpoint. From facility regulations to adoption of new technology, the bull stud is a place where growth — both on a personal and an industry level — is being emphasized.

"We've got to be very open-minded about what bulls go into the bull stud," Gooden explains. "If [the bulls] have got the EPDs and can sell semen, then that's what's got to work for us."

For the next few years, the team is looking forward to increasing semen sales, growing the facility's reach and broadening their understanding of this new business venture, Gooden says. It's just another addition to their very full and busy circle.



found their ideal female and used those genetics and physical traits as the foundation for goals that reach beyond the pasture.

### *Bringing it around*

Creating a solid cow herd was only the first brush stroke in painting a much bigger picture.

“Tony wanted to take it a step further,” Gooden explains. “He said he wanted to go all the way from start to finish, from breeding to slaughter.”

Just a short drive from the farm’s headquarters is the “stress-free finishing feedlot.” David designed the facilities five years ago after he gathered up idea after idea as he visited feedlots nearby. He took the best elements and combined them into a one-of-a-kind operation.

The lots are all covered, keeping cattle protected from harsh weather year-round. Big fans circle lazily overhead constantly in the summer, keeping air fresh and cool. The use of wasp larvae prevents fly populations from taking over the premises.

Cattle are so content, there’s hardly a sound other than the chewing of cud.

From a business standpoint, the feedlot is where they capitalize on calves that don’t quite have what it takes to stay in the program or run through a sale. It offers an element of efficiency and profitability for the farm that most other producers don’t have the luxury of falling back on.

“You’ll see some calves most people wouldn’t take a chance on, but with the comfort level that we have in that feedlot, we can make calves that most people would never want into being pretty good slaughter calves in the end,” Gooden explains.

It’s been a business decision so beneficial that he couldn’t help but extend it to bull customers. Valley Oaks Farms offers a calf buyback program to breeders using their genetics.

“To be honest, we’re trying to help them make every penny they can,” Gooden says. “Calves are held for a five-cent bonus on top of the Missouri weekly market summary. So, if a 600-pound (lb.) calf is bringing \$1.50, they get a \$1.55, basically. That’s \$30 more in their pocket on a 600-lb. calf.”

Those calves must still meet rigorous standards. Gooden requires calves weigh at least 600 lb., have a minimum of two rounds of shots, be dewormed and pass a visual inspection he conducts himself.

Running their own feedlot allows Gooden to sort calves on individual appearance. Rather than sending a whole pen at a time, he pinpoints calves ready for slaughter based on their individual performance.

Beyond the ease and comfort of having a finishing facility down the road from the farm’s headquarters, Gooden says the feedlot helps validate the performance of their bulls.

While he says commercial producers are still learning to place the same emphasis on genetics and EPDs that seedstock producers do, carcass data and calving ease direct (CED) are two areas where most conversation happens come sale season.

By using EID (electronic identification) tags on calves at the feedlot, Gooden has access to individual data on each animal. Then that information is tracked back to specific sires.

“That’s how we’ll prove some of our bulls,” Gooden says. “We’re looking forward to helping our customers and ourselves.”

### *Final stretch*

Away from the feedlot facility and the quiet cattle, Valley Oaks Meats sits among the welcoming roads of downtown Blue Springs, Mo. It’s a place where the Ward family connects the start of the beef production chain to the final meat product served on dinner tables across the country.

From the local sauces, seasonings and rubs that line the shelves to the photos proudly displayed showcasing the

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*— Jennifer Ward*





rich history of the butcher shop, there's no doubt this storefront is a place built on history and passion.

Tony Ward's wife, Jennifer, heads the store, as she has since its purchase in October 2020. Tony's heart lies with the cattle herd, but Jennifer says she lives for the interactions she has every day with consumers.

The facility generally goes through seven full head of beef a week — seven head that come strictly from the Valley Oaks feedyard, fed and hand-selected for harvest by Gooden.

"The idea was to go full circle," Jennifer explains. "What we wanted to accomplish here with this particular location was, for one, just kind of spreading the word, letting people know that we are very rare in the fact that we are a butcher shop that does everything start to finish."

At the storefront, Jennifer has a hard time staying behind the register. She can't stop the smile that lights her face every time the door opens to someone new.

"My immediate, knee-jerk reaction when they say this is their first time in here is do a quick CliffsNotes® version of our story," she says.

The tale is her family's livelihood and their widespread mission to leave the Earth a better place than they found it, all while finding tasty ways to incorporate protein and education into the average consumer's diet.

Though there's much to share, she says she most enjoys the family ties that come with each cut of beef sold.

"We grow this beef literally right down the road," Jennifer says. "I think [customers] cannot believe when we open that cooler door, and they can see the hanging carcasses. They're like, 'I didn't even know that it actually was something I could see. I thought it was something in the movies.' I get to say, 'This. This is how we make your food. This is how it gets in the case.'"

While today Jennifer can identify almost any cut of beef


and even explain to customers how and where it was harvested from the animal, she has not always been in tune with agriculture.

When Jennifer first started dating her husband 20 years ago, beef was never on the menu.

"I've gone from being a vegetarian to running and operating a butcher shop," she says with a laugh. "It's definitely been a learning experience for me, but it's been super awesome. I've become pretty passionate about it at this point — the experience and educating the community on where their food comes from — because most people just don't know."

Part of her ability to connect and converse with Valley Oaks Meats customers comes from her unique shift of perspective on the subject of meat products.

Quality cattle are raised at the hands of a family that cares for their livestock far beyond the scope of making a profit. As families become regulars, she connects the dots of the industry one sale at a time.

This opportunity to encircle as many people as possible in their legacy is the perfect ending to the story that the faces of Valley Oaks are telling at each segment of the beef production chain. 

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