

# The 'No Way Lady'



Debbie Paver, now a licensed mobile vendor, markets Charter Oaks Beef at local farmers' markets.

STORY & PHOTOS BY ANDRA CAMPBELL

Ten years ago Debbie Paver had an idea. She had been selling quarters and halves of her registered Angus steers to neighbors in Templeton, Calif., for some time. She thought she could market individual cuts of meat at her local farmers' markets in San Luis Obispo County.

"The markets were fine with it," Paver says, "but the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) said the meat had to be processed, as well as cut and wrapped, in a federally inspected plant—with a USDA stamp." This was fine by her, but there wasn't a plant in the area able to comply.

The facility she used for the quarters and halves could process, cut and wrap the meat, but Paver couldn't market the meat under its USDA stamp. Paver decided perseverance was her only option. She started earning her reputation as being the "no way lady."

"I just didn't take no for an answer," Paver says, explaining her 10-year battle to get her meat to the market. She looked into laws governing locker beef on state and federal levels, talked with Agricultural Compliance in Sacramento, Calif., and made a lot of phone calls. Finally someone told her they knew a guy who might be able to help.

By this time it was 1996, and Paver was at her wit's end. She had done everything she could to get her meat to the market. She was frustrated and tired of being told, "no way, lady." Thinking this might be her last chance, she waited for him to return her call. The man on the phone turned out to be the first one who had told her, "no way, lady." This time he listened and wanted to help.

## Where there's a will

"He told me that it wasn't going to be easy, but here's how . . ." Paver says. Finally, she was able to take her steers to California Polytechnic State University and have them processed under federal inspection.

"I then took the meat to the same facility I had been using, and they were able to cut and wrap, under federal inspection, and put their USDA stamp on the packages that said 'packaged for Debbie Paver by AMK Service.'"

It was a simple solution that took years of hard work and

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### Debbie's Frozen Roast

For well-done meat, Debbie Paver suggests baking frozen roasts for 1 hour/pound (lb.) at 300° F. She advises putting onions and 1 inch of wine or water in the bottom of the pan, then covering it and placing it in the oven. One hour before the roast is done, place potatoes and carrots in the pan and check the water level. If you like your roast a little less well-done, she suggests a little less time.

Paver's favorite cookbooks include the *Steak Lovers' Cookbook* by William Rice and *The Complete Meat Cookbook* by Bruce Aidells and Denis Kelly.



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perseverance. Paver is now a licensed mobile vendor who markets her Charter Oak Beef at two local farmers' markets — one in Templeton, the other in Cambria. She has started a mail-order business and has gained a lot of customers via word of mouth. She is proud to offer her locally grown, USDA-inspected beef grown without administered hormones or antibiotics to her customers.

At first Paver priced her meat close to grocery-store prices. "I wasn't able to keep up with the demand," says Paver, who raised her prices to where she could keep the supply more even with demand.

In order to keep the supply up, she approached her bull customers and asked them if they would be interested in supplying steers for her Charter Oak Beef Program.

Today, Charter Oak Beef is made up of Paver's own steers and a few of her bull customers' steers. She offers a premium to the commercial breeders if they tag the calves she selects and do not implant or treat them with antibiotics.

Last year Paver processed 26 steers, which may seem small when compared to the millions of pounds of *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>™</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) product sold in the United States. But it is a lot for a woman who works full-time as a veterinary technician, manages her herd of cows, finds time to artificially inseminate (AI) for other ranches and volunteers as the local 4-H leader.

The steers are grass-fed to 800 pounds (lb.), then go into Paver's own lots for



120 days where she grows out each one.

"They have to be primarily black, have no ear or hump, and be hormone- and antibiotic-free," Paver says. "There has only been one time I had a steer get sick enough to treat, and I was able to treat him with aspirin." If an animal were to get really sick, Paver says she would treat it with antibiotics, then exclude it from her beef program.

"The steers are fed a pelleted ration of corn and barley," Paver says, explaining she likes to see them finished at 1,200 lb. "We don't have a way to get the steers federally graded, but most of the steers would eyeball at Select-plus to Choice-minus."

"I have to keep in mind that the processing plant at Cal Poly closes down for vacations and summer," Paver says. "They have been great to work with."

Looking to expand to 50 steers in the next few years, Paver is thinking about two other places that can process her steers — Fresno State University (FSU) and the processing plant in Los Banos, Calif. "FSU is good because the plant stays open during the summer," she says, "and Los Banos is fairly close to home."

### Marketing her brand

"How I list my daily cuts and prices affects what I sell that day," Paver says. "If I suggest an eye of round roast, it's one of the first to go." Paver says she selects 10-12 different cuts to sell on a particular day, ranging from fajita strips

to porterhouses. "I am able to market all of the cuts by marketing only certain cuts on different days." For example, she will offer a daily mix to help move the more popular cuts with the lesser cuts of meat.

"My most asked question is 'where does the tri-tip come from?'" Paver says, explaining that the tri-tip is one of the most popular cuts in California. "My page is smudged from showing customers where the tri-tip is located."

Answering questions and providing information is a huge part of what Paver does every day. "Some people want to purchase meat but don't have any idea where certain cuts come from or how to cook them," she says. The California Beef Council has provided her with pamphlets and national cook-off winning recipes that her customers enjoy.

The future looks bright for Charter Oak Beef. Paver is hoping to expand into offering a precooked product her customers can take home and eat right away. Plus she hopes to attend as many as five farmers' markets per week.

"I used to always want to move to Idaho," Paver says, explaining her need to get away from all the people and all the grapes taking over her hometown. "But now I have decided that if you can't beat them, you have to join them, and that I would like to sell a cut of meat to go with every glass of wine that is being sold in this county."

## Four Oaks Angus Ranch

When Debbie Paver was 9 years old, she had her first 4-H projects. "They were cooking and a market lamb," Paver says. "After a few meetings, I decided that raising a lamb was not the project for me."

Ellis Roth, a family friend, suggested a registered Angus breeding project. With help from her parents, Bob and Janet, and her sister Diane, Paver was able to make a dream come true.

In 1967 she purchased her first heifer, and by 1972 she had a name for her ranch — Four Oaks — and six females.

She was told by Richard Johnson, head of the California Polytechnic State University beef program, that her cattle were "good, but old-fashioned." So Paver bought a heifer, sight unseen, from a leading Angus ranch in Idaho.



**Every female in Debbie Paver's herd traces back to the purchases she made when she was 14 years old. Today she has 35 cows.**

(Purchased for \$2,000, the heifer remained in the herd for 22 years.) She purchased another heifer from the same ranch the following year.

"These were the last cattle I bought," Paver says, explaining that every female in her herd stems from the purchases she made when she was 14 years old.

In 1978 Paver and her show cattle took the trip to the Western National Angus Futurity in Reno, Nev. "This was the highlight of my junior show career," says Paver, who was named premier breeder of the show, exhibiting daughters of her two foundation females. "I was the first junior to win this award."

Paver also received her American Farmer Degree from the FFA that same year.

Shortly after her trip to Reno, she graduated from Tempelton High School and went to junior college in San Luis Obispo, Calif.

"I wanted to be a veterinarian," Paver says, explaining why she decided to attend the University of California-Davis. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in animal science and applied to veterinary school. "The year I applied, there were 798 applications and 126 students who were accepted," Paver says. Much to her dismay, she was in the majority of students who were not accepted.

After applying a second time, with the same outcome, Paver moved home and went to work for Templeton Veterinary Clinic. She has been there for 20 years, working for veterinarian David Eckstein as his assistant.

Today she has a herd of 35 cows, which she artificially inseminates (AIs) to popular bulls.

"I have used some bulls that did not click with my cow herd and decided I liked my cows the best in the late '70s. I asked myself what I did then that I don't do now." One of the breeding tools she had then was a son of one of her two foundation females. "Luckily we collected him and still have semen," Paver says. She decided to use him again last year.

"His calves were easy-calving and easy-selling," she says, adding that she would like to build back up to 20 of his daughters.

Another of Paver's highlights was having the champion Angus bull at the 1991 Cal Poly Bull Sale. Today, she markets most of her bulls privately.

Four Oaks also participates in the Beef Replacement Heifer Show at the Mid-State Fair in Paso Robles, Calif. "This is a great program," Paver says. "Kids buy weaned heifers from us, raise and breed them, and sell them as springer heifers to local cattlemen in our area."

