

# BLACK COWS ON GREEN GRASS

*Roseda Black Angus Farm finds a way to thrive near an urban landscape.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*

Having grown up in the hustle of Baltimore, Md., Ed Burchell found himself drawn towards a quieter lifestyle at the beginning of his retirement. The rolling pasture ground of Monkton, just a half-hour drive from the city, was the perfect place for him to start making his dream of having “green grass with black cows” a reality.

Burchell purchased 100 acres and built a house with his wife, Rosemary, but quickly found the ways of a cattleman could be elusive to someone just getting started in the business. Out crabbing on the Wye River one day, Burchell spotted some black-hided cattle — the University of Maryland’s Wye Angus herd — grazing just off shore.

“He came around the corner with his newfound interest in cattle and wanted to know what we did,” recalls Dean Bryant, herd manager for the university at the time.

From gestation periods to artificial insemination, Burchell’s list of questions quickly served as the foundation for a relationship with Bryant, who says it wasn’t long before they became friends.

When Bryant was planning to collect carcass data on a university research project, he invited Burchell along. The two traveled to a packing plant to observe the ongoings of a study dedicated to uncovering the accuracy of carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs), a tool new to the industry in the early ’90s.

Hanging carcasses cherry red in color were highly marbled and caught Burchell’s attention, and he purchased a few steaks directly from the plant. After a good day at the grill and an outstanding experience at the dinner table, Bryant says Burchell came back to him with one big question.





# “HOW COME I CAN’T ALWAYS GET BEEF THIS GOOD?”

It was a casual inquisition, but one that sparked a business camaraderie. Bryant was brought on as a consult for Burchell’s infant cattle herd and started introducing him to the world of genetic progress.

“Ed kind of fell in love with the aspects of producing high-quality beef,” Bryant explains.

In 1996 Bryant started working for Burchell full-time and helped center his breeding program around high carcass cattle. Beyond Burchell’s personal soft spot for the breed, Bryant says the Angus industry came backed by a database that would help propel their expanding herd to success. EPDs and other genetic prediction tools offered numbers that allowed Bryant to easily pinpoint animals capable of fitting into their operation.

“We just started from scratch,” he says. “The goal was to produce cattle that would produce the best eating experience possible yet remain functional and productive for the commercial cattleman.”

A year in, Burchell was ready to make a permanent place for his livestock in the industry. When he wondered about what it would take to get his beef in grocery stores, he knew establishing a brand was the first phase of a grand plan.

Roseda Black Angus Farm was born.

Next on the agenda: expansion. It was only step two, but Bryant had his doubts it would ever be crossed off the to-do list.

Monkton is a popular area for those, like Burchell, who want to escape city life. Its picturesque views attract a lot of individuals after the “quiet lifestyle,” so there’s high demand from nonagricultural sources for land.

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Determined as ever, Burchell found property available just down the road from his original homestead.

"If he'd have told me we could have come into this populated area and purchase 250 contiguous acres ... I wouldn't have ever believed it," Bryant says, shaking his head with a smile. "But that's what he was able to do to start the farm."

## Landing opportunities

Though Bryant and Burchell were creating cattle that could hang well on the rail but also perform from a maternal standpoint in the pasture, the market for their calves was fairly small.

"I feel like we've got some of the top cattle in the country, but we're not in the circle that most people use to branch out to find their bulls," Bryant adds.

That's when the duo realized there might be a benefit to having their farm landlocked by families without ties to the ag industry. Commercial bull customers might be somewhat scarce, but hungry mouths were not.

"What we do have is lots of people. And they like beef," Bryant explains.

It was a realization that could help the farm stay profitable and achieve Burchell's business goals.

Bryant and his wife, Marcia, started working with local packing plants to process cattle. The tender, flavorful meat made a splash in the community.



After the owners of a local grocery store chain tried a Roseda steak, the farm had its chance to get their brand behind meat counters.

As demand increased, capacity stayed about the same. Dean and Marcia had to work harder than ever to keep moving forward.

“It was hard to get going at first,” Marcia admits. “It was a lot to do.”

In those initial days, long before the sun was up, Marcia hooked up the truck and trailer to move cattle from the feedlot to the plant. She swapped the truck for their family’s minivan back at home, lining the back with brown paper. Then, she headed back to the processing facilities to load up carcasses. Beef quarters were delivered to the five local Graul Supermarket locations and individual cuts kept in small coolers at the farm until customers picked them up that same day. Rosemary Burchell and Marcia would even team up to make one pound steak burger patties by hand for a local restaurant.

The schedule might sound grueling, but at the time, Dean says there was no time to question the workload.

“We just did what we had to do to get this thing up and rolling,” Marcia adds.

That first year, 50 head were butchered. The second year saw 120 cattle sold.

Meanwhile, increasing numbers resulted in the farm outgrowing several processing plants. The Roseda team encompassed Bill Ruppertsberger into their ranks. Ruppertsberger’s Baltimore plant was joined by a facility purchased by Burchell to form Old Line Custom Meat Company — a business decision that allows the operation to slaughter 72 head a week for grocery chains and restaurants.

Dean attributes one secret to success to a Maryland USDA employee who stressed the importance of dry aging. All Roseda beef hangs for 14-21 days, no matter what end product the carcass is used for.

Dry-aged ground beef isn’t common in the industry, but it certainly helped the farm reach new customers. As Baltimore restaurants purchased their products, Dean says people fell in love with the “dry-aged burger.” Several businesses even won the title of “Baltimore’s best burger” while using the farm’s dry-aged ground beef.



FIVE DAYS A WEEK, CUSTOMERS CAN PURCHASE FRESH OR FROZEN BEEF DIRECTLY ON THE FARM, JUST A FEW FEET AWAY FROM THE ROSEDA HERD.

Eventually, demand reached a point where Marcia wanted more than just a garage to conduct sales out of. She opened the doors to a new storefront in Monkton in 2014.

Five days a week, customers can purchase fresh or frozen beef directly on the farm, just a few feet away from the Roseda herd. Guests can even come enjoy a pit beef sandwich lunch Fridays and Saturdays. The Indiana recipe highlights Dean and Marcia’s background and is one of many personal touches that make the store special.

Beyond the shaved, smoked top round, Dean says the biggest selling point of the store is his wife. He jokingly calls her the “bartender” because customers will stay an extra 15 minutes after making a purchase just to chat.

From secret recipes and cooking tips to an introduction to unique cuts of beef and general cattle knowledge, Marcia goes above and beyond to connect with anyone who visits. Dean says she’s even taken the time to know them personally, often asking familiar faces about family members by name.

“I’m a people person,” Marcia says. “The customer service part for the store means a lot to me.”

Serving their community is such a priority for the Roseda team that they’ve found innovative ways to connect with the locals.

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“Being in a big population, we’ve actually embraced it and capitalized on it where we invite them to the farm,” Dean explains.

Beef and Beer Nights offer live music, burgers and beef hot dogs. Springtime is marked by families waiting in lawn chairs during “calf watch” as mama cows bring new life into the world. Consumers, restaurateurs and chefs have even witnessed live demonstrations of management practices like synchronization firsthand at the farm.

Best of all is that the storefront helps keep the business in action — its proven to be nearly equivalent to the commercial bull market.

Dean says if a calf can’t be sold intact for a good price, they’ll be castrated and fed out. Marcia can sell an 816-pound carcass in the store as retail cuts for close to \$4,500.

Though they have to be business minded, Burchell and the Bryants don’t stay on the farm for the financial profit. The gain from the work they do hits a deeper level.

“We love it,” Dean says simply. “It’s a way of life.”

With every steak sold, every guest to the farm, Roseda Black Angus Farm serves a greater purpose of helping share that way of life with the rest of the world.

When someone points to the brand on Dean’s vest as he walks through town, he says he can’t help but smile. To be told people know the farm and what it stands for is true happiness in the cattleman’s mind.

“That kind of stuff just really makes you feel good,” he adds.

That’s the origin of this operation: happiness. The farm was established years ago solely for the pure joy that comes with having black cows on green grass. **AJ**

