

Marketing retail cuts of Angus beef under the Cloudland Farm label, keeps Bill Emmons. . .

IN CONTROL AND IN THE BLACK



Bill Emmons has found a successful niche market in selling small retail cuts of beef in Vermont.

When most agricultural entrepreneurs plan marketing strategies, they choose to think big. When William Emmons plotted his cattle marketing plan, he chose to think small.

By thinking small, he has created a successful niche market for the purebred Angus herd he and his wife, Cathy, manage at Cloudland Farm near Woodstock, Vt.

Small, however, doesn't refer to the size of the market Emmons has created for his beef; it refers to the method he uses for selling his product. Retail cuts of Cloudland Beef are sold direct to customers in small, individual, labeled packages. This is a successful alternative to selling a live animal across the auction block or as sides or quarters of freezer beef.

The obvious look of enthusiasm on the youthful face of this 44-year-old farmer leads you to believe he relishes an opportunity to share the recipe of his marketing venture. "You have to identify your market first and then produce for that market," he advises anyone contemplating going into the business of cattle breeding.

"I figured there was a big market out there for people who are eating meat, especially here in New England," he explains. "Red meat got a bum rap for too many years with the cholesterol scare and all. Now I think people have come around to wanting a good, lean, wholesome product produced in the area in which they live."

Emmons has been in the retail beef business since July 4, 1992, when Cloudland received a license from the State of Vermont and approval from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The retail market he established has to be both convenient and profitable for several reasons.

BY JANET MAYER



The beauty of black cattle grazing on Cloudland Farm's rolling hills of lush grass has been the subject of many professional photographers. The photographs have appeared in Town and Country magazine and other publications, and have also been used on postcards, greeting cards, jigsaw puzzles and placemats.



"Since we have a large population, but very few cattle breeders wanting to buy breeding stock in New England, selling retail cuts of meat seemed to be the answer to my marketing problem," William says. "It's just the opposite in the Midwest and Montana, where you have a lot of breeders and lots of cattle but few people. So I thought, why not sell beef to all of these people in our area? I can have a customer base of about a 1,000 people wanting to buy beef versus maybe 15 or 20 fellow breeders wanting to buy breeding stock from me."

Control over the product from his farm is another reason William has for wanting to sell retail cuts of beef instead of live animals. "I found I was in control of everything in the lives of these cattle, until they left the farm. But once they left here, I had no control over the market or the price ultimately received for them. I just didn't like taking a chance. I tried selling sides of beef, which was always difficult since most people don't want that amount at one time. That's when I decided to try selling retail cuts."

Customers can purchase Cloudland Beef at two local stores in the Woodstock area, as well as at the Mt. Tom Farmers Market and by special order straight from the farm. Emmons feels the best selling points of his product are leanness and taste. Two popular items sold through the local stores are 91 to 92 percent lean ground beef and stew meat. Cloudland ground beef is checked periodically by the state for the percentage of lean in order to meet labeling re-

quirements and maintain the quality. Steaks and roasts are the best selling items, both at the farm and the farmers' market.

Some Cloudland cattle are sold as breeding stock through the annual New England Angus Association production sale. Emmons says cattle breeders in New England have discovered a good bull market in Nebraska, and a good feeder calf market in Lancaster, Pa.

Keeping various markets in mind, the breeding program for Cloudland cattle is kept as simple and economical as possible. Striving for good genetics and uniformity, most breeding is by artificial insemination (AI), which Emmons feels gives him more control in these two areas.

"When I select the bulls I want to use in my breeding program, I don't look at full-page color ads showing the bulls that have won the major shows; instead, I want to see proof of what a bull can do," William says.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs), he adds, are especially good in this area. He wants to see a bull from a hard-working herd that is making a living for the owner. He goes by a breeders reputation.

Another area of importance to Emmons is carcass quality. The breeder of the winning pen in the Certified Angus Beef Value Discovery Project is impressive to him. He looks for marbling in breeding selection. "The bottom line is hanging weight and yield ratio," he says. Cloudland cattle destined for the beef market are grain-fed until approximately 18 months of age and 1,200 pounds. They are sent to Sharon Beef, a processor which is state and federally inspected.

"Cattle are just like ripened fruit," William says. "When they're ready, they're ready; not before and not after. You have to be consistent."

This beef producer likes to have a carcass that weighs no more than 700 pounds. A 20-month-old animal with an 800-pound carcass is too much. He says you have to achieve balance in your breeding and finishing programs to get just the right age and size for slaughter.

The cattle are processed immediately upon arrival at the plant. Carcasses are aged for at least two weeks. They are then cut to Emmon's

specifications, packaged with the Cloudland label and frozen. They are returned to the farm, where they are weighed, priced and kept in freezers. Labels display price per pound and weight.

Emmons credits the quality of his beef to the lush grass grown in Cloudland Farm pastures. The cattle are rotated among 40 paddocks equipped with electric fencing. Neighboring pastures are leased by the operation, which, he is quick to point out, puts otherwise fallow land back into production.

"Essentially we are grass farmers converting grass into edible protein, and Vermont produces exceptional grass," he says with pride. "I don't need 50,000 acres for my herd. I can put 50 or 60 head of cattle on an acre or two of grass, moving them every two days and come up with some incredible results. I also feel this type of farming benefits the state, since dairying, which was always the major agricultural industry in Vermont, is on a big decline."

In addition to pasture grass, the operation produces 10,000 to 14,090 bales of hay every year. Some is sold, but the majority is kept at the 1,017-acre farm to feed the herd, which numbers about 70 head of Angus cattle and a few Herefords.

Located not far from the town limits of Woodstock, you must travel on a dirt road that winds along the edge of hills above two steep, narrow valleys to reach Cloudland Farm. The road dates back to the early days of the farm when it was owned by Elton Smith, who in 1892 purchased 18 adjoining properties to create Cloudland Farm.

In 1906 Emmons's great-grandfather, Nathaniel Henry Emmons, a Boston attorney, purchased the farm for \$25,000. The parcel totaling about 2,000 acres was bought for his son, William B. Emmons. At the time of purchase, Cloudland was considered to be one of the largest farms in New England.

Since the late 1800s, the operation has been home to herds of Southdown sheep, Hereford and Angus cattle, horses and Boston Bull Terriers. At one time, the farm was noted for production of maple syrup and sugar, along with hams and bacon from Berkshire hogs kept by the Smiths.

Nathaniel and his son maintained a herd of 200 Jersey cattle, producing processed butter and cream. They also operated a saw mill. During the 1940s, the family bred Angus cows, but later returned to dairy production.

When William B. Emmon died in 1953, his son William B. Emmon Jr., took over the farm. Both men maintained careers in law away from the farm. In 1978 the fourth and present gener-

ation, William B. Emmons III, a professional photographer, took over management of the family farm. His mother, Elizabeth, and his sister, Dana, live in the original farmhouse which was built in 1780. Bill and Cathy and their 11-year-old son, Nathaniel, live down the road about an eighth of a mile next to the barns. A recent addition to the family are twin daughters, Margaret and Abigail.



The Emmons family hopes the operation will grow and that the fifth generation, Nathaniel or one of the girls, will take over from their father.

In order to preserve the land for future generations, William, his mother and sister have donated conservation restrictions on the acreage of Cloudland Farm. This will not only assure its continued existence as rural farmland, it will give a broader corridor and protect the outstanding scenery along the Appalachian Trail, which runs through the center of the property. Elizabeth had sold the corridor to the National Park Service some years ago.

Because of his conservation beliefs, Bill serves on several boards dedicated to that cause. He is chairman of the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission and serves as chairman of the Pomfret Planning Commission.

Elaborating on his feelings about the environment and his goals in farming, William says, "I am committed to agriculture in Vermont. In our own operation, we are still in the embryonic stages. In the future, I wouldn't mind being the Ben & Jerry's of beef in New England."

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Cloudland Farm, established in 1892 has produced maple syrup and sugar, sheep, hogs, horses, Boston Bull Terriers, and dairy and beef cattle over the years,