

Prime Opportunity

With a shrinking bull market, a Kentucky breeder shifted gears to finishing more beef.

by Becky Mills, field editor

The cliché about turning problems into opportunities is mighty worn, but it is exactly what Jimmy Gilles did.

The Owensboro, Ky., Angus breeder says, “The bull customers I had 10 to 15 years ago have either passed away or got out of the business. Every apartment is full and new houses are being built every day. Now there are only a few cow herds in Daviess County.”

Fortunately, those apartments and houses are filled with meat eaters, especially those who crave locally grown, top-quality beef. With help from his son, Jim, the two ramped up production and marketing of their home-grown beef.

“When we started 15 years ago, we were only doing four or five a year for freezer beef, then we jumped in,” Jimmy says.

Now they’re up to 100 fed steers and heifers a year, around 70 still marketed as wholes, halves and quarters with the rest sold at the farmers’ market or their on-farm meat market.

While Jimmy handles more of the production end, Jim, the fifth generation of Gilleses to farm and



Son and father Jim and Jimmy Gilles team up to produce and offer top quality beef to their customers.

raise cattle in Daviess County, works more on the marketing side. As more of their customers wanted to buy cuts of beef, Jim, who came back to the farm in 2012, started taking their beef to the local farmers’ market. In 2016 they retrofitted a small house into a meat market.

“I had no intention of doing this,” Jim says. “It started as a hobby, and was only supposed to be open on Saturdays. Now it is open six days a week.”

While their entrance into the retail meat business was a smart move, timing has brought its share of challenges. Since COVID disrupted the national food supply chain, they have plenty of competition in the freezer beef and local beef trade but found ways to set themselves apart.

Quality first

Every ounce of their home-grown beef is not only USDA inspected, it is USDA graded.

“We probably get 50-60% Prime, and the rest high-Choice,” Jimmy says.

Quality is on their minds from the time Jimmy carefully matches his cows with semen from just the right bulls to displaying their vacuum-wrapped beef in sparkling-clean coolers.

The father-son team are also planning on looking into the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) program for home-grown and marketed beef.

Listen to your customers

“Go slow to find out who your customers are and what they need,” Jim says. “Be willing to talk to people at the farmers’ market or on the farm. They have a lot of questions. I found out I didn’t know what I thought I knew.”

The Gilleses have a very diverse customer base.

“They’re young, single, families and seniors,” Jim says.

There is also a wide income spread. While they do have customers in the upper-income category, there are others who struggle to keep their pantries stocked. To make it easier for them, the Gilleses started taking EBT cards a year and a half ago.

Continued on page 74

What's good for the pasture is good for the plate

Longtime Angus breeder Jimmy Gilles gives the credit to the Prime and high Choice grades of his steers to 70% Angus genetics, 30% feeding. Fortunately, the meticulous selection criteria he uses work equally well for the 10 to 15 bulls he markets a year, his own replacement heifers and the 100 or so home-bred steers and feeder heifers he finishes annually.

"The last 10 years, we've really been paying attention to the carcass traits," says Gilles. "Carcass-quality EPDs (expected progeny differences), marbling, ribeye area, \$B (beef value). I try to get at least into the top 20th percentile on marbling and ribeye, and at least 280 on \$B, although some are much higher." He adds, "I try to match every cow to a bull. What do I need done?"

The Owensboro, Ky, Angus breeder is by no means one to forget the other traits, though, whether it is his own 120-cow herd or when he and his son, Jim, are looking at bulls for Jim's and his brother, Brandon's, 60-cow herd. He breeds by artificial insemination (AI) all the cows in his fall-calving herd, and uses natural service for his spring-calving cows.

"I want a calving-ease bull with a big spread to yearling weight," says Jimmy. He says his bull customers typically market their calves through Kentucky's Certified Preconditioned for Health (CPH) sales, so yearling weights are a big factor. Calving ease is another necessity for his customers, whom he says range in size from 30-head to 200-head herds.

Maternal EPDs get Gilles's attention and in turn, he participates in the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) MaternalPlus® program. He also says, "Feet are a big deal. I really pay attention to the claw angle and the foot score." He adds, "In this part of the country, you have to watch milk. If my customers have good fescue, we're lucky." He also says, "Docility. No matter what, you have to have that."

Gilles buys semen from ABS and notes, "I only come up with four to five bulls that fit my program." He uses DNA testing to track his progress with his selection criteria and says, "I want to pick a bull that will work on my farm, your farm and your neighbor's farm." It pays. In mid-June, he said, "I've already got bulls sold that won't be a year old 'till fall."

For the steers and heifers that don't meet his criteria for seedstock, he focuses on a feeding and finishing program that makes the most of his genetics. For starters, he normally creep-feeds all his calves for the last 30 to 45 days before weaning, which is when the calves are an average of 205 days old. It's a move University of Georgia animal scientist Francis Fluharty endorses. "I'm a big fan. Creep-feeding the last month and a half before weaning pays, especially if you're

selling through your own market. If we get the starch in the creep feed, it is converted to marbling." He says this is more than hearsay, the correlation between creep-feeding and grade has been studied extensively.

Fluharty says the feed efficiency of calves, normally 8.2 to 8.5 pounds (lb.) of feed to 1.0 lb. of gain, can result in a positive return most years if the cattle are properly marketed or if the producer retains ownership and the cattle are marketed on a grid.

Even if you're selling your calves as preconditioned feeders rather than retaining ownership, Fluharty still says creep-feeding is a good move. "When you wean calves, they know what a feedbunk is and they know what dry feed is. Then there is less stress on them and less sickness."

While hefty calf prices and slightly lowered feed prices make economic sense in the current market, even when the cost-return of creep-feeding isn't quite so clear, Fluharty says the increased marbling and decreased stress and sickness at weaning make it a practice producers need to consider, especially if they are feeding and marketing their cattle like the Gilles family.

In Gilles's case, his attention to detail doesn't stop at creep-feeding. After weaning and a 30-day preconditioning period, he puts the feeder animals in separate fields from the replacement heifers and bulls. The steers generally weigh around 550 to 650 lb. at weaning, and he leaves them on fescue and orchard grass pasture along with 1.5% of their body weight of feed, usually corn, soyhulls, corn gluten and cracked and whole corn. They typically gain around 2 lb. a day for three months.

Gilles says that varies, however, depending on when and how many he needs for his finished market. "We have to space them out and not push them to gain all they can. Once a month we pull the biggest ones."

When they go to the feedlot, they're on a self-feeder with the same ration and free-choice hay. They stay in the feedlot around 130 to 150 days until the steers finish at around 1,250 to 1,350 lb. and 1,100 lb. for the heifers.

While Gilles gives most of the credit for the Choice and Prime grades to genetics, Fluharty says he isn't giving his management enough credit. "I will give genetics at least half the credit, but you can destroy those genetics with improper feeding and bunk management. You can get average Choice, high Choice and Prime with above-breed-average genetics, but if you're getting that high a percentage of Prime, you're doing a good job of feeding as well."

Editor's note: For more information on Hill View Farms Meats, see: www.hillviewfarmsmeats.com.



Jim adds, “We touch every race and ethnic background. We can do some specialty cuts the ethnic population can’t get anywhere else.”

This includes beef tongues and hearts. They also carry halal beef, which meets Muslim dietary laws and has unique harvest and processing specifications.

The Gilleses also carry other meat products besides beef. They raise their own pastured poultry and buy locally raised, finished hogs. To get the best processing for each species, they use three different harvest facilities. While it adds to their time investment, Jimmy says its worth it if it helps their community.

“When you have any kind of retail store, you have to be diverse,” Jimmy adds. “You have to have other products to keep customers. Nobody else in the area had pork or chicken. It met a need.”

Jimmy’s wife and Jim’s mom, Christy, helps with home-baked goods, including her famous rum cake, a best seller at Christmas. They also cook hamburgers in the summer.

Jim helps draw customers by stocking a selection of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture’s Kentucky Proud products, including specialty foods and handmade candles and soaps.



While Jimmy Gilles (left) does more of the production chores of their beef business, son Jim (top) handles more of the marketing side.

Get ready for a learning curve

Jimmy already knew how to raise and feed quality cattle, but Jim says, “Once you go into retail, it is a whole different thing. There are a lot of challenges.”

Along with massive amounts of paperwork and inspections, including proving labeling claims, there was a lot to learn and invest in.

“Any kind of restaurant and grocery equipment is super expensive,” Jim adds. “I’m convinced there are gold bars in some of it.”

He still says he’d do it over again, although the University of Kentucky ag economics major admits there’s a few things that could have been different to make the journey easier.

“I’d have a concrete business plan,” he says. “Sometimes the growth is too slow, but I’ve been pretty happy for the most part.”

Judging by the amount of beef they’re selling, so are their customers.

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