

# Symbiosis, Cowboy Style

Partnerships between cattle producers and pubs/microbreweries are a win-win.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor



► David Berry, Skip Welsh, Jennifer McSpadden-Welsh and Will Berry all benefit from their beef-brewers' grain partnership.

**R**emember symbiosis from biology class? To paraphrase, it is a relationship between two critters, and it works out well for both of them. Then again, you could just call it partnering. Whatever the label, three young Georgia cattlemen are working with a pizzeria and a pub, both of which have their own microbreweries. It's a slam dunk for all involved.

The story in the northwest part of the state started back in September 2016, when Skip Welsh had 5-gallon (gal.) buckets of wet brewers' grain piling up as a byproduct from his Phantom Horse Brewery.

"We had a couple of folks picking it up, but not regularly," he says.

He contacted Will Berry, who was delighted to relieve him of the buckets, all eight a week.

"I had learned about brewers' grain in animal nutrition class," says Will. "I told him, I'll take everything you got."

The timing was perfect. Will, 25, and his brother, David, 26, had graduated from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC) in Tifton, Ga., in May 2016 and had joined their family's Huntland Farms in Chickamauga, less than a mile from the brewery.

Says Skip: "I send a text to Will, they pick it up that day, and the next morning the clean buckets are back."

Last winter the brothers approached Jennifer McSpadden-Welsh, Skip's wife, and the owner of Pie Slingers Pizzeria, housed in the same building, about using ground beef from their finished-beef enterprise.

"I thought it sounded like a good fit," says Skip. It turns out he was right. "It is fantastic ground beef"

Jennifer not only uses it on her pizzas, but in her "To Die For Lasagna," as well.

"Our customers love it," she says. "I haven't sold this much lasagna the whole time, and I make it a lot." So far, this



► Georgia cattlemen Will Bentley supplies his home-raised ground beef to Kaitlynn Kressin, owner of Ocmulgee Brewpub.



► Brothers David and Will Berry are helping expand their family farm by finishing beef. They save about 20% on feed costs using brewers' grains.



► Georgia cattle producer Will Bentley digs into his namesake burger at Ocmulgee Brewpub.

translates into around 100 pounds (lb.) a month.

### Similar story

The story is similar in Macon, in the central part of the state. When Ocmulgee Brewpub opened last December, it had 200 gallons of wet brewers' grain to dispose of every week. While folks were picking up small amounts for everything from soap to bread to goat feed, they needed someone they could depend on.

A mutual friend introduced owner Kaitlynn Kressin to cattleman Will Bentley, who has a family cow-calf operation in Thomaston, around 30 miles away. Bentley works in Macon, though, as executive vice president of the Georgia Cattlemen's Association. In March, he started coming by before or after work, or on his lunch hour, and picking up the brewers' grain.

"Now we have it down to a smoother process," says Kressin.

In March, Bentley approached Kressin about trying the ground beef from Bentley Farms.

"I showed them pictures of my cows like I was a proud parent," Bentley jokes.

"We liked Will's story," says Kressin. It turns out more than Bentley's story has been a hit. "Our customers love it."

One of the favorite items on Ocmulgee Brewpub's trendy menu is the Bentley Burger, featuring locally raised Bentley Farms beef, smoked gouda, lettuce, an onion ring and bacon aioli.

"That's what everybody orders," Kressin says. They serve around 100 burgers a week.

"The partnership is awesome," says Kressin.

### Adding diversity

While there was a certain amount of being in the right place at the right time for both the Berrys and Bentley, all three cattlemen

## Wet brewers' grain fits the finishing niche

For brothers Will and David Berry, and Will Bentley, wet brewers' grain fits right into their finishing enterprises.

"We feed a commercial beef developer feed," says Will Berry. "We slowly integrate the brewers' grain into it."

The Chickamauga, Ga., producer estimates they save around 20% with the brewers' grain. From weaning through the finishing phase, the cattle gain 2.5-3.0 pounds (lb.) per day on the ration. They also have access to fescue and clover grazing and free-choice hay.

In Thomaston, Ga., Bentley uses brewers' grain with a separate mix of soybean hulls, rolled corn, cottonseed hulls and liquid molasses. His cattle also have access to pasture at all times, as well as free-choice hay.

"They average 2.5 to 3.0 pounds a day gain," he notes. "They have to be gaining a minimum of 2.5 pounds to get close to the marbling we want."

Wet brewers' grain can be a healthy addition to a finishing program, agrees Mississippi State University Extension beef specialist Daniel Rivera. "It is a fairly highly digestible fiber source and has a high level of TDN and crude protein." He says the TDN on the byproduct is normally in the 70% to 75% range, and crude protein typically ranges from 25% to 34%. "It is an excellent protein source, in my opinion."

The Georgia cattlemen have discovered another plus to brewers' grain, and that is palatability.

"Every animal on the place comes running when they hear my truck. It is almost a dessert to them," says Bentley.

David agrees: "The bulls go bonkers for it."

However, Rivera says there are two cautions with the feedstuff. The first is the high fat content, which ranges from 7% to 10%. If cattle eat too much, they can get diarrhea, and, Rivera says, "It can impair their ability to digest other nutrients."

The other drawback is the high moisture content. Wet brewers' grain is typically only 24%-25% dry matter. Even if the brewer is giving it away, if the producer has to haul it

very far, it can be too expensive to use. In addition, it needs to be fed within a week or it can mold, especially in the summer.

While both the Berrys and Bentley are grateful for the brewers' grain, handling it, at least in their operations, means extra muscle work. Will and David Berry pick up the buckets, put them in their truck, pick them up again to put them in their barn, then pick them up again to pour in the cattle troughs.

Will Bentley recently made his life a bit easier when he found a small hydraulic lift on sale. That makes getting the 55-gallon rubber trash cans of brewers' grain from the pavement to his truck and off again less of a chore.



► Wet brewers' grain from Phantom Horse Brewery helps feed the cattle at Huntland Farms, while home-raised ground beef from Huntland Farms helps feed customers at Pie Slingers Pizzeria.



► Will Bentley picks up wet brewers' grain for his cattle from Ocmulgee Brewpub.

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were already growing their finished beef enterprises and were prepared.

“We started talking about it at ABAC,” says Will Berry. “We wanted to diversify the cow-calf operation. People were really starting to care where their beef comes from.”

“We saw the localvores,” says David. “To us, freezer beef going to our friends and family is a perk rather than a business. We wanted to make it a business, and we wanted a couple of more enterprises.”

“They wanted to add value to what we

already had,” adds their mother, Betts.

Will Bentley echoes the Berrys when he talks about the 85-cow commercial operation he operates with his father, Danny; his brother, Matt; and his brothers-in-law, Anthony Green and Ryan West.

“For the size of our farm, I had to think of how to be profitable,” he says. “We looked at our resources, abundant pasture, clean water, access to reasonably priced feed inputs. For the past several years we’ve done a little freezer beef for our family and friends, but I’m trying to grow to the place where I’m using all our steers for our beef operation.”

All three young cattlemen were already prepared with the logistics of handling beef, rather than live cattle, too.

### Angus — the quality connection

Besides venturing into direct sales with their top-notch ground beef, Georgia cattlemen Will and David Berry and Will Bentley share another connection. Angus bulls make up the entire bull battery in both the Berry’s Chickamauga-based operation and Bentley’s Thomaston herd.

Will and David’s mom, Betts, started the operation at Huntland Farms in 1980 when she purchased a commercial herd, complete with a Brahman bull. Next, she tried Santa Gertrudis, then Simmental, then Red Angus. However, Betts says, “We’ve used black Angus for the last 15 years.”



► Angus bulls are used exclusively at Huntland Farms, Chickamauga, Ga.

Will and David are grateful. “They have good marbling traits, and their frame is ideal,” Will says. “They don’t get too big, but they have enough volume.”

His brother, David, adds: “They are extremely marketable. That can’t be overlooked.”

“The Angus Association has done an incredible job of marketing their product. They have made it the best in consumer’s eyes. They sell it for us,” says Will Berry.

He also appreciates the data that comes with buying Angus bulls. “We went out and bought two Angus bulls that had the carcass EPDs (expected progeny differences) we were looking for.”

Will Bentley tells a similar story. “We’ve used Angus bulls for as long as I can

remember. I’ve crossed with some Herefords just to get white-face calves, but we always seem to come back to Angus genetics. Marbling is the key.”

Bentley adds: “They are also pretty easy-calving. Our cattle have to get it done on their own because they are spread out across three farms. I’m on the road a lot with my job at the Georgia Cattlemen’s Association, so most of the time it is just my dad and mom checking the cattle during calving season.”



► Brothers David and Will Berry are expanding the cattle enterprise started by their mom, Betts Berry. She purchased a commercial herd in 1980 to start Huntland Farms.

### Thinking through the details

The Berrys haul their finished cattle more than 70 miles to R&D Custom Slaughter, a USDA inspected facility in Pikeville, Tenn. Will Bentley has a longer haul, more than 130 miles, to Towson Meats, also a USDA-inspected facility, in Tifton, Ga. In addition, Bentley has invested in two freezers for the back of his truck, which are powered by a generator.

The USDA inspection allows the Berrys and Bentley to sell beef, rather than live animals, to their customers.

To simplify meat handling, as well as ensure their customers get the best quality, the Berrys have the whole carcass ground for their 90:10 ground beef. “It is delicious,” says David.

Bentley’s 81:19 blend is similar, although he does remove the steaks from the carcass before grinding for his family’s use.

They have also made sure their insurance policies cover their beef operations. The Berrys have complete liability insurance through Georgia Farm Bureau. David says, “Mom’s a pray for the best and prepare for the worst kind of person.”

Bentley went a step further. In addition to liability insurance, he formed a limited liability company (LLC) for his beef business, so his family is protected.

“The farm now sells the cattle to my LLC,” he explains.

Of course, like almost any agricultural enterprise, they’ve had to learn to work around weather, whether it is cold rain or Georgia’s infamous hot, humid summers.

“We weren’t getting the gains we wanted,” says David Berry, “so we connected the pens to the barn and took out a wall so the cattle could get under the roof.”

Bentley tries to avoid finishing cattle in the summer altogether, but says it created a gap

in his supplies. That, along with the growth in demand, has pushed his family to re-evaluate their strategy.

“Even though we are proud our product is grain-finished, we promise our customers the cattle are always on pasture, with access to clean water and forage, so confinement is not an option for us,” he says. “For that reason, shade trees become extremely important during the hotter times of the year.”

Cash flow can also be a challenge.

“We hold the cattle longer and take on more risks,” says Bentley.

Still, all three of the young producers are grateful for their new partnerships. “The advantages outweigh the risks and disadvantages,” says David.

“It is more work, but we love doing it,” says Will Berry.

“Finishing my own cattle has allowed me to get immediate feedback on the quality of our cattle,” says Bentley. “It’s similar to producers who retain ownership of their calves. Until you see your own calves finished, and look at that ribeye, it is hard to make the connection. All of us are in the beef business, not just the cow-calf segment.”

He adds: “It’s really forced us to look at the quality of our bulls, as well as the mama cows raising those steers. When the end product is stamped with your family’s name on it, it takes every management decision to an entirely different level.”

Then, of course, there is the economic side.

“This is more of a guarantee,” says Will Berry. “We set the price.”

“When we were selling our steers after weaning and preconditioning, we were marketing on a small enough scale we were giving away a lot of profit potential,” says Bentley. “Now, I’ve captured several segments of the industry for our farm.”

He adds: “I’ve taken commercial cattle we’d typically sell at commodity prices and now we’re able to sell them for the equivalent of high-end registered prices.”



**Editor’s Note:** *Becky Mills is a freelancer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.*