

Kitchen-Table Quality

PHOTO BY GARY FIKS



Oklahoma stocker outfit takes the long view on relationships, Angus excellence.

Story & photo by Lyndee Patterson



► Business at Wooderson Farms is conducted at the kitchen table, Harold Wooderson says.

It's not always easy to find quality anymore. Things are designed to last just long enough to go off warranty, or until they need to be replaced by the next "bigger and better" thing.

But if there is one thing Harold Wooderson believes in, it's quality, in every aspect of life, and especially in the cattle business.

He and his wife, Mary Ellen, live on the farm near Blackwell, Okla., where Harold was raised, though they have expanded it through the years by purchasing adjoining lands. They grow corn, soybeans and wheat in conjunction with a year-round stocker enterprise.

"Our cattle operation really changed in 1982," Harold says. That year, their sons graduated — Max from college and Bruce from high school — both ready to farm.

"We formed the Wooderson Farms partnership, and realized we needed to change to be able to feed a couple more families," he says, so they started a stocker operation. Now they manage 4,000-5,000 calves on wheat pasture and graze a thousand more on native grass in the Osage Hills and in the Kansas Flint Hills on a leased ranch.

Most stockers function on a short-term, "buy low, sell high" mentality, with the cheapest cattle they can find grazing enough

grass to hit the market before selling them for the best price they can get. But Harold takes a longer view.

Quality vision

"This is where our operation is," he says from the kitchen table that doubles as an office. "It goes back to when I was a kid; we'd look out the window and see who was driving in or out. That was how we knew what was going on. For as long as we've known anything about it, this is where the business is conducted."

Whether looking out that kitchen window or seeing beyond, the Woodersons have big-picture vision.

"When we buy a calf, we're thinking 'steak' not 'steer,' and we plan on owning them all the way through," Harold says. "We know who the end users are, and we need to produce what they want."

He knows most consumers want quality, and he's determined to give it to them beginning with the cattle he buys.

Two ranches in Montana supply nearly 3,000 Angus-based calves each year to graze on those wheat pastures. If the Woodersons have any extra pasture available, they'll buy more northern cattle through a video auction or custom buyer.

The calves come with other benefits besides their potential for high-quality beef. They also have excellent health records.

"That's partially why we think they're worth so much," Bruce says. "We don't have those doctor, labor and medicine costs — if

cattle are even thinking about getting sick, they're not gaining weight."

To wean the calves and help them make the transition, the Woodersons had a custom-blended receiving pellet made. "We wanted something they would eat because they liked it, not because they were hungry," Harold says. "We also give them hay, but the best prairie hay isn't quite good enough to suit us."

Calves are fed twice a day in the weaning pens for nearly a week before being moved to small Bermuda grass traps. There they continue to get prairie hay, but the pelleted feed is backed off to once a day. Finally, they move to wheat pasture.

"I want the calves to gain the most they possibly can while I own them," Harold says. And gaining weight is something these cattle do extremely well, averaging nearly 3 pounds (lb.) per day on wheat pasture. Snow doesn't even slow them down.

"They'll be out there rooting around with snow clear up to their eyes, and it doesn't bother them a bit," Bruce says.

"But the cattle that come in from the south, they're standing around shivering," Harold adds.



► Above: Most stockers function on a short-term, "buy low, sell high" mentality, but Harold Wooderson takes a longer view.

Quality people

Not only do they appreciate the quality of these northern cattle, but the relationships they've developed with the families that raised them as well. Harold first purchased calves from Tom Hougen of Hougen Ranch in Melstone, Mont., through a video auction in 1991, but a strong friendship was soon formed.

Hougen made two arrangements with the Woodersons after visiting their farm 19 years ago. First, he agreed to sell his cattle directly to them, and he has done so continuously ever since.

"We've never had a written contract; it's just my word and his word," Hougen says.

Harold has a lot of faith in Hougen, trusting that he'll get good cattle for a fair price. He shocked the Montana rancher the first year he bought the calves on private treaty, because he didn't go to the ranch to sort through them.

It was then that Hougen heard one of his favorite quotes from Harold. "He told me, 'Just don't send anything you wouldn't want to receive,'" and Hougen has repaid that trust ever since.

"I give him the best sort anyone could get," he says. "I know the ones that shouldn't go, so we take them out."

For the second part of their arrangement, Harold tells Hougen what changes he would like to see in the cattle. And when Hougen makes a change, the Woodersons let him know if it worked well or not.

"I always check with Harold," Hougen says. "I use him as a sounding board to advance my cattle for both of us." Obviously he takes that very seriously, and his main way of making adjustments is through bull selection.

"If he can buy better genetics, that's what he does," Harold says.

Along with the genetic superiority, the Woodersons also appreciate the docility. "The tameness is worth a lot," Bruce says. "If they are tame, they gain better, and they don't tear up the fence."

Even though their calves are high quality and less prone to getting sick, it takes a lot of time and effort to care for several thousand of them. Of course, these stocker operators put in the effort to do it properly.

"We are religious about seeing our cattle every day," Harold says. His sons get up early every morning to check the calves, fences, water and mineral at all their pastures.

"When they go through in the morning, they won't see every individual," he says, but



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at least once a week they ride through to inspect and count all the cattle.

In the past the Woodersons have fed cattle at several different lots, so when they are ready to take the calves off wheat pasture, they have a variety of options available.

Many of those options were forged through connections made at beef industry conferences. "The boys used to laugh because every time I'd go to a cattle convention, I'd come home wanting to try a new feedyard," Harold says.

"He'd have to feed a load of cattle with anybody who bought him supper," Max jokes. However, with careful feedyard selection Harold says they've never gotten a bad deal. He credits the experiences as allowing for good learning opportunities.

After the cattle are fed out, they are marketed on a live basis. Before people started paying premiums for superior cattle, Harold thought the only reward was in their increased performance.

"But I thought, eventually, people would recognize their quality and start paying a little extra for them," he says.

"Eventually" finally came, and now the packers are more than happy to pay a premium to get their hands on Harold's cattle.

"They recognize anything with our brand is usually pretty good quality," Harold says. "It's really rewarding to have that sort of reputation."

He wants to continue to develop these relationships with individuals throughout every part of the industry. "Not only those we buy from and the packers we sell to, but ultimately the consumers," Harold says.

Over the years he has built a thriving enterprise with his sons, one that is centered on quality in their cattle, relationships, reputations and, ultimately, the food they provide.

► **Left:** "When we buy a calf, we're thinking 'steak' not 'steer,' and we plan on owning them all the way through," Harold Wooderson says.

► **Below:** "We've never had a written contract; it's just my word and his word," Tom Hougen says of his partnership with Wooderson.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HOUGEN RANCH

"It's what I had set out my life's goal to do: to farm and raise some cattle," Harold says, taking another look out the kitchen window.



Editor's Note: Lyndee Patterson is industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

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— Harold Wooderson**