



► Claybrook Farms cattle are fed on concentrate but still have access to high-quality pasture.

# Hometown BEEF Makes Good

Tennessee cattleman woos Memphis  
with high-quality local product.

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

**T**he timing couldn't have been better for Dave Turner and Claybrook Farms Meat Co.

The Covington, Tenn., cattleman was raised in his family's 200-cow registered-Angus operation. Then he added seven years of experience owning and managing his own restaurant — 100% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®), of course. Next, he supplied a local meat company with homegrown beef.

When the gentleman who owned the meat company passed away, Turner and his father, Carl, even talked about taking over the business.

Dave, a cattleman at heart, says, "I wasn't going out and selling beef." His father was ready to retire, and the herd needed Dave as badly as he needed it.

No problem. It just so happened Dave's cousin, Michael Rice, was a salesman by passion and profession.

"I was happy and willing to do this full time," says Rice.



► **Above:** Michael Rice uses his sales experience to market Claybrook Farms beef, while Dave Turner uses his cattle experience to produce it.

► **Below:** Covington, Tenn., cattleman Dave Turner is combining his love of cattle and his past experience as owner of a steak house to build and supply his own beef company.

## Special places

The result was that in February 2011, Rice delivered the first product from Claybrook Farms Meat Co. No starting at the bottom for this outfit. One of their first customers was the famed Memphis hotel, The Peabody.

“We knew what we had was special,” says Rice. “We found special places. We knocked on doors and sold the farm and the family.”

Dave adds, “The food director at the Peabody was raised on a farm in West Tennessee. We had the account before we priced the beef.”

“We had 12 to 15 restaurants the first six months,” says Rice. “Two years later we had almost 30. Most order weekly.” That is in addition to a health-food store, a retail market and the Memphis



Farmers’ Market, not to mention St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital.

Rice says the beef sells itself. He gives the chef or food manager a sample, explains the production side, the quality and the history of the herd, which has been honored with the Historic Herd Award by the American Angus Association. The honor is presented to herds that have been in the continuous production of registered Angus for 50 years or more.

Claybrook’s specs appeal to chefs and household consumers alike.

Rice says they shoot for an 1,100-pound (lb.) animal with one-half inch of fat cover, processed at 16 months of age. The beef has been raised with no antibiotics or added hormones. It is humanely raised and harvested, and no preservatives

are used. Once the carcass is split, it is dry-aged for 21 days. The result is beef that Dave says varies between low- and mid-Choice.

## Local support

Even better, the whole production chain begins and ends within 50 miles of Memphis, appealing to trendy Memphis foodies who seek locally raised products, as well as those across nearby state lines in Arkansas and Mississippi.

“We are fortunate enough to have three USDA packing plants in West Tennessee,” says Dave.

Ryan Trimm, owner and executive chef of the popular Memphis restaurants Sweet Grass, Next Door and Southward Fare and Libations, says, “I’m a big believer in supporting the local economy and local farmers. . . . I’m impressed with the marbling and flavor. We get a lot of good feedback from our customers, too. It is a big hit.”

Ask Dave about the on-farm production recipe, though, and to hear him tell it, it all falls under the category of good management.

“The number one thing is the health of our cattle,” Dave says. He and his crew use a rotational grazing system to keep the Bermuda, fescue, red clover and orchardgrass pastures at top quality. Other than 30

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days at weaning, the cattle aren't confined, even when they are being finished on a concentrate ration.

"We do it like grandpa did and put feedbunks in the pastures," says Dave.

Genetics fall in the No. 2 spot.

"We breed for maternal production to maintain the cow herd," Dave says. "We ultrasound to maintain the carcass characteristics, but we don't emphasize it."

Even at No. 2, Rice says the genetics, as well as recordkeeping, score points with the beef customers.

"One of the biggest 'Wow!' factors is when I deliver the beef, I can text my cousin and get a three- or four-generation quality perspective," Rice says. "I can tell them everything about the quality control from the calf to the plate. That is something other food distributors can't do."

Dave adds, "We've ultrasounded every bull and heifer for 25 years." In addition, Rice keeps a photo on file of every carcass, cut at the 12th rib, that is processed for Claybrook Farms Meat Co.

The Claybrook team's commitment to meeting their customers' wants and needs is paying. They are currently harvesting four animals a week, soon to go up to five. Turner

says three steers a week is their breakeven point.

Even finding a home for ground beef, usually a stumbling block for beef operations gone retail, isn't a problem. Randy Lock, who helps both Dave and Rice, says, "That's why we went to high-end restaurants that sell hamburgers for \$9 to \$12. Once we found that niche, we can't keep enough for a hamburger for ourselves."

Italian

restaurants are a big user of their ground beef, Dave points out. "We try to keep as much of the primals out of the restaurants as we can and into the retail and direct markets."

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**— Ryan Trimm**

### Seedstock customers

Claybrook Farms Meat Co. is also a market for Claybrook Angus bull customers.

"Less than 20% of the cattle in the [Claybrook] meat business come from Claybrook Angus," says Dave. "We buy back feeder steers from our bull customers and pay top prices. Where our customers also make



► Randy Lock helps Michael Rice as needed at Claybrook Farms Meat Co.

extra money is there is no shrink and no yardage fees."

In 2013, Claybrook purchased more than 200 steers from seven herds, and Dave predicts it will go up to more than 300 in 2014.

Sledge Taylor, who has purchased two to three bulls a year from Claybrook Angus since 1976, sent 30 steers to the meat company in 2013 and retained ownership on them until harvest.

"I was very satisfied," says the Como, Miss., cattleman. "We stress good genetics and proper nutrition, and this is a way to get paid for it. The positive feedback from satisfied customers is an added bonus."

He adds, "I'll definitely do it again." By the end of January, he had already sent 15 head and says, "I'll sell a lot more than I did last year."

As for Dave, he says, "We turn down customers. We've converted five or six vegetarians. I get just as much satisfaction from talking to somebody who ate our beef as selling a bull." He adds, "We think other Angus breeders could benefit from this."

**AJ**

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

### Added value through value-added grant

Randy Lock is the self-described gofer for both Claybrook Angus and Claybrook Farms Meat Co. Since he has another full-time job, he helps Dave Turner feed calves and pitches in at the beef business when Michael Rice needs a hand. By far his biggest contribution, though, is ferreting out a USDA Value-Added Producer grant for the meat company. It was no gimme.

"We weren't even aware the grant was there until Dave met another grant recipient," says Lock. "I dove in and started doing all kinds of research."

His enquiries began at the local USDA office, then moved to the state, but it was phone calls to USDA headquarters in Washington, D.C., that finally started to pay.

Lock's research let him know it wasn't a do-it-yourself project. The application itself was 150 pages long. The team hired a consulting firm, but it still took three months to complete the application. Even though the process was overwhelming, it paid dividends beyond the grant money.

"I'm proud of these guys," says Lock. "They were flying by the seat of their pants. They didn't have a business plan. They didn't have written goals and objectives."

"Now we have all three," says Turner.

They were also pleased with the support they got. The packinghouse, their bull customers, the chefs who use their beef and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture all wrote letters of support to include with the application. Their efforts paid. This is the first time in Tennessee's history that a farm and family received the full amount available.

The Claybrook team plans to use the three-year grant, awarded in 2013, for harvest fees, advertising and promotion.

Lock says the name of the grant fits the use. "We are adding value to the product and the local economy."