

Connecting with Consumers

Snow Creek Ranch has found a niche selling its home-raised, natural beef directly to consumers through Denver farmer's markets.

by Kindra Gordon

The mantra of the beef industry for more than a decade has been an emphasis on listening to what consumers want — and then delivering that beef product to them.

Angus breeders Stan “Doc” and Glenda Haag of Coffeyville, Kan. — along with daughter Michelle, son-in-law Joe Kopriva and their four young children, who live at Centennial, Colo. — are doing just that through their home-raised, natural Snow Creek Ranch beef brand and direct beef marketing efforts in the Denver metro area.

It’s a business that got its start from Doc’s own quest for good beef.

From his own experience

Having spent many years as a physician

in Iowa, Haag knew he liked corn-fed Angus beef. So, when he retired from his practice and he and Glenda moved to Coffeyville to raise hunting dogs about 15 years ago, they found it increasingly frustrating that high-quality beef wasn’t easily available to consumers like themselves.

During that same time, Haag tells that they raised “a few cattle of every color” to help keep the grass mowed down for their dog training. Those cattle were sold by

the pound and, as Doc tells it, “were not that good to eat.”

Then, by happenstance, he and Glenda attended the Spur Ranch Angus sale about eight years ago, and Glenda convinced Doc to buy a few Angus. He ended up buying a truckload. Unbeknownst to them at the time,



it marked the beginning of their journey into selling beef direct to consumers.

The Haags fed out a few head of Angus for their own consumption and also for their daughter and her family in Colorado. Michelle took a roast to church one Sunday for a potluck, and from there the rest is history.

Everyone loved the beef, so Michelle called her dad to tell him she thought she could sell one or two head for him to friends in the Denver area. He aimed higher and asked, “Why not 10?” So, Michelle sold quarters and halves of 10 finished steers.

“It grew from there,” Doc says.

Today, Snow Creek Ranch beef is featured at 15 farmer’s markets within the Denver metro area. Michelle and Joe coordinate the sales and marketing while working with a full-time sales manager and a team of people to help them have a presence at the markets. Rather than selling quarters and halves, they focus on selling beef bundles featuring steaks, burgers, all-beef hot dogs and prime rib. The beef is all natural and grain-finished. Snow Creek Ranch beef bundles are also available via the Internet at www.docscows.com.

Learning from consumers

After being on the front lines with consumers via farmer’s markets for the past five years, Michelle reports that the response to Snow Creek Ranch beef has been wonderfully positive.

She shares that consumers tend to be most interested in knowing that the beef is truly what it is said to be — naturally raised and with no added hormones. They also like to hear about the old-fashioned way the cattle are raised.

The family aspect is important to many of their customers, Michelle adds. “People tend to feel better knowing we are a family operation.”

Michelle and Joe, along with their children, are often present at the markets to sell the beef. Their oldest son, Will, 10, helps set up, serve samples to patrons and clean.

Because Snow Creek Ranch has a presence at 15-17 markets per week within the Denver metro area, a team of part-time staff also helps with sales. When they are working the market, a family photo is often displayed so consumers can still connect with the family from whom they are buying the beef.

Another factor important in direct marketing is offering samples. Michelle says if consumers try, they will often buy. “We sample our burger, and then they are usually hooked on our beef,” she says.

In the last few years there has been more competition from others selling beef via the farmer’s market setting, she says, but these

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A focus on genetics

In his venture to raise “good-eating beef,” Stan Haag acknowledges that proven genetics for carcass traits are the key to success.

In developing his registered Angus herd during the past decade, Haag has worked with Colorado-based consultant Harold Miller of 7 Triangle 7 Cattle Co. LLC. They have focused on using sires with a high intramuscular fat (IMF, or marbling) expected progeny difference (EPD), and the GeneStar® DNA test for tenderness is used on all of their cattle and in selecting sires for the herd.

Today, the Snow Creek Angus herd includes about 250 mother cows, of which about 170 are registered.

In building the herd, Miller says, “Through acquisitions from breed-leading herds and aggressive AI (artificial insemination) and embryo transfer (ET), the Snow Creek herd has been built for balance for the meat program and to provide bulls for commercial producers with a penchant for retained ownership and grid marketing.”

He explains that selection has focused on a balance of high IMF and high ribeye area (REA), along with a balance of performance with feed efficiency and low-birth EPDs.

Miller adds that the Angus EPDs are supplemented with DNA technologies to provide the desired end product while still producing productive, fertile females.

The results speak for themselves. “The \$B (\$Beef index) EPD has served well to achieve the desired balance of productivity and carcass quality,” Miller says. He reports that, currently, nine herd bulls at Snow Creek Angus Ranch average 1.6 BW, 92 YW, 0.85 Marbling, 0.40 REA, and \$63.00 \$B.

“The consistency, predictability, and profitability of the harvested cattle raised by Snow Creek Ranch has increased dramatically over the last three years,” he adds. “A testament to this uniformity is the narrow range of ratios in many of the registered cattle IMF scores when actual scores are much higher than breed average.”

Haag and Miller say future selection goals for the herd will include even more DNA technologies while keeping an eye on the kind of cow needed to be productive, but most importantly, what the end consumer desires to purchase.

“Needless to say, Snow Creek believes this can be accomplished with Angus cattle,” Miller concludes.

To that end, Haag is also beginning to sell Angus bulls with its own special niche of carcass traits for direct-marketing programs. During its first sale in February 2008, half interest in a bull sold for \$50,000. The moderate-framed bull had a balanced EPD profile, and the GeneStar DNA test gave him a 6-star tenderness rank along with an 8-star feed efficiency ranking.



are often beef brokers rather than small, family operations. Thus, she says, the true family roots of Snow Creek Ranch are still a selling point over their competition.

“The family connection is our niche and we are selling to other families,” she says. “They know us, and they know we stand behind our product.”

Steep learning curve

Haag admits there have been some challenges to getting their line of beef to where they are today.

“I don’t know why the hell I kept going,” he jokes. “I guess it’s because I have a very optimistic daughter.”

Among the most frustrating steps was

finding the right processor. Haag has worked with five in the last eight years.

Presently, the beef is raised and finished on Haag’s ranch in Kansas, then the cattle are shipped to Colorado for processing. The beef is then aged a minimum of three weeks before it is cut and packaged. Thus, Haag says, it was critical to find a meat processor who was willing to age the beef, and then who knew how to cut and trim it properly after it was aged.

Another important detail was finding a processor who could ensure the Snow Creek

CONTINUED ON PAGE 70

Connecting with Consumers CONTINUED FROM PAGE 69

beef would not be switched with other beef. Haag reports that that has happened to him in the past. Today, he uses DNA testing on all cattle so all steaks can be traced to his records and ensure it is indeed Snow Creek beef.

To ensure high-quality, good-eating beef, Haag has also invested in developing a registered Angus herd with top carcass genetics. Working with Colorado-based consultant Harold Miller of 7 Triangle 7

Cattle Co. LLC, Haag has focused on using sires with a high intramuscular fat (IMF or marbling) expected progeny difference (EPD). Snow Creek Ranch also uses the GeneStar® DNA test for tenderness on all of its cattle and in selecting sires for the herd.

The cattle are finished on corn, along with some flax to help increase the omega-3 content in the beef. There are no hormones used, and Haag says if an animal needs

antibiotics they are excused from the program.

“The cattle are really cared for,” he says. “They are never out of our possession during the finishing process. And, they are always handled gently; I’m a real stickler about that.”

Good growth

Haag says the obstacles have been worth overcoming, as their beef sales have been growing and getting great reviews. In the last six months they’ve sold beef direct from 91 head — at premium prices of \$8 per pound (lb.) for hamburger and in the \$200 range for a bundle of four

to six steaks and seven to nine burgers.

Next year, Michelle believes they will be able to sell beef from 125 head.

Haag adds, “We don’t have a problem with price. Our meat business has grown 20% this year.”

He credits their success to the quality of the Snow Creek beef and to the connections they’ve made with consumers.

“You’ve got to sell yourself,” Haag says.

“To market direct you’ve got to have a marketing plan, the right people to do the marketing and an outlet.”

— Stan Haag

“Consumers want to know where their meat is coming from. So we work to tell them about the ranch; we want them to know us.”

The Koprivas also provide information via their web site and maintain an extensive e-mail list of customers to share information about the ranch and to offer beef specials.

“The easy part is raising the cattle,” Haag concludes. “To market direct you’ve got to have a marketing plan, the right people to do the marketing and an outlet.”

Looking forward, Haag admits he is having some growing pains. Currently, he has about 250 cow-calf pairs. He says there is certainly more demand for their beef, but his intent is to grow slowly and remain focused on quality. “I’m not increasing my sales unless the animals come from my breeding and finishing,” he says.

Snow Creek will continue to focus on marketing to consumers directly. “We’re very happy with how it’s going,” he concludes.



Editor’s note: To find out more about Snow Creek Ranch and its direct marketing efforts, visit www.docscows.com or call 720-488-6767.