

TWO JOBS



ONE MAN



ONE BREED



It takes a special kind of passion and endurance to work two jobs just for fun.

Story & photos by *Becky Mills*, field editor

AT 4 p.m. Thursday, May 19, Jonathan Perry, general manager at Deer Valley Farm, eased his farm truck through a pasture of fall calvers. He pulled back onto the paved road; closed the gate; rushed back to the Fayetteville, Tenn., headquarters; hurried into his office; swapped his Anderson Bean boots for a pair of Nikes; sprinted to his Jeep; and drove 18 miles to Pulaski with a quick detour to pick up his 12-year-old daughter, Alli, at school.

He squeezed into a parking spot at Hickory House Restaurant; gave his wife, Jackie, a quick kiss and a “Love you, babe”; tied on his Deer Valley apron; and heated up the grill.

With the Giles County High School graduation due to start in two hours in the stadium right across the street, customers start filing in. Perry soon had round steak, a ribeye, and a couple of chicken breasts sizzling. His night ended at 11:20 p.m. when he finished prepping brisket for the smoker.

The casual observer might wonder why Perry is moonlighting as a cook when he has more than a full-time job at Deer Valley. It turns out, Jackie is the restaurant manager. He just grins and flips the meat.

“I’m the best free help she has,” he teases.

Before you start thinking the 46-year-old cattleman deserves Husband of the Year honors for helping his wife, there should be full disclosure: He and Jackie actually own the restaurant. He then says, “I have a passion for cooking, smoking meat and watching people enjoy my cooking. I’ve always wanted to open a restaurant.”

He adds, “Jackie always said she’d divorce me if I opened a restaurant.”

Jackie quickly corrects him. “No, what I said was if you bought a restaurant, it would be with your next wife, but I’m still here.”

Then comes even more disclosure.

Following a dream

Jackie is the one who originally told Perry the Hickory House was for sale. A paralegal in Pulaski for 30 years, as well as a Giles County native, Jackie knew the former owner lost his battle with cancer. His family struggled to run the restaurant, but it didn’t work out, and the restaurant sat empty for two years. In the spring of 2014, she and Jonathon, better known as J.P., signed the papers.

“She knew how much I wanted it, and she



► **Left:** Jonathan Perry is the general manager of Deer Valley Farm in Fayetteville, Tenn.

► **Below:** Daughter Alli and her mom, Jackie Perry, get to spend time together at Hickory House Restaurant.



was burned out with her paralegal job,” says Perry. “She’s the most wonderful woman in the world.”

Now, at least four afternoons a week, Perry makes the drive from Deer Valley to the Hickory House. On Tuesday and Thursday nights, when he cuts meat, he is lucky if he gets to leave by 11 p.m. There are also two 5 a.m. mornings a week when he drives to Pulaski to put meat in the smoker. He also opens for the Sunday lunch buffet. His schedule, especially combined with his day job, is formidable.

Moving at full speed between the prep table and the grill, Perry says, “I bury myself in it. It is my release.”

He is also quick to note, “The juggling act is only possible because of the support of Fred and Rinda (Fred and Rinda Clark, owners of Deer Valley Farm). We’ve had their blessing since Day 1. They treat me like family. They are Alli’s godparents.”

In addition to being the main meat man, Perry describes himself as the behind-the-scenes person. He orders the food, manages the inventory, plans and manages the daily menus, and schedules the other cooks.

“I’ve got a good system. Obviously, I do a lot of it over the phone and by text and email,” he says, adding, “I try to have it where I’m not the only one cooking, because I never know when I can leave the farm.”

There is also the starring role from the best woman in the world.

“It is almost imperative that one of us be here at all times,” says Perry. As a result, Jackie opens up at 9 a.m. Tuesday through Friday and usually stays until around 5 p.m. On Saturdays, she comes in at 4 or 5 and stays until closing, which is officially 9 p.m., but in

reality, is until the last customer is served.

“Jackie runs it every day, not me,” says J.P. “She is the face of the place. She handles the front end of the restaurant and the waitstaff, as well as all the finances, the bookkeeping and the recordkeeping.”

Like J.P., though, she thrives on the hours she spends at the restaurant.

“I just love the people. I’m a people person.” After her 30-year legal career, she also says, “I know everybody and everybody knows me.”

That proved to make financing the restaurant a seamless act.

“The local bank right here, First National Bank, loaned us the money,” she says. “They were great. They knew this business and didn’t hesitate. The first thing they asked is if I was going to manage it.”

Jackie is also in charge of Hickory House’s thriving catering business.

“I love the catering,” she notes. “I have two weddings this weekend.”

Making it all work

With Jackie’s and J.P.’s relentless hours, obviously they have to make an effort for family time. J.P. says, “I see my wife and two kids here more than I do anywhere else.”

The reason he cuts meat on Tuesday and Thursday nights is because that’s when Alli is gone for cheerleading practice. He runs the restaurant on Sundays so Jackie can take Alli to church.

“We also reserve Monday and Wednesday nights for our family at home,” stresses J.P. “Other nights we usually meet each other on Highway

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► **Above:** Jonathan Perry says *Certified Angus Beef*® brand brisket is so tender it doesn’t have to be marinated. He does a dry rub instead, and smokes it.

► **Below:** All beef served at Hickory House Restaurant is *Certified Angus Beef*® brand.



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64 as we swap shifts.”

Their son, Zach Bailey, 24, also puts in his time. He puts briskets, pork loins and butts in the smoker for J.P. on Monday nights and kept the restaurant going for a week in March while J.P. and Jackie took Alli on a vacation for her spring break.

It is a good thing the Perrys can see each other at the restaurant, because it continues to grow.

“We’ll have 100 to 150 customers a day on a weekday, on the weekend we’ll serve 250 a night, and we’ll have 200 to 250 at lunch on Sunday,” says J.P. “We feed the blue-collar crowd at lunch and the white-collar crowd at night.”

Both collar colors come for the homemade sides and desserts, and unbelievably grand barbecue, but it is at night where Perry’s grilling and choice of beef shine.

“We are 100% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) [brand],” he explains. “We’ll serve you a steak as good as Morton’s or Ruth Chris at half the price. Less overhead allows us to do that.”

He adds, “CAB is the most consistent quality beef on the market. It is unbelievable. It is only natural as an Angus breeder I would use it, but I didn’t realize how consistent it is until I opened the restaurant.” He goes through 600 pounds (lb.) of CAB a week, ranging from fillets to hamburger.

Jackie, who grew up showing Angus cattle



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and had her own herd when she married J.P. in 2002, says, “CAB does cost more, but you can tell the difference.”

J.P. credits those steaks with helping to draw folks from surrounding counties and states. To celebrate their anniversary last August, Doug and Mary Ellen Hicks drove 427 miles from Tifton, Ga., to Pulaski, Tenn., for Perry’s steaks.

“When we thought about places we liked to eat, Hickory House kept coming up,” says Mary Ellen.

The March before, Doug, manager of the beef unit at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC) in Tifton, and Mary Ellen, veterinarian and animal science professor at ABAC, took a group of their students to see

the ABAC cattle on feed in Iowa. As usual, they made Deer Valley Farm the last stop on the way home.

Besides giving the students an opportunity to see quality Angus cattle, it is a reunion. Mary Ellen was Perry’s advisor when he went to ABAC, and Doug worked for him at Dorminy Land and Cattle.

By that spring-break trip, J.P. and Jackie had Hickory House rolling, so the Hickses and their students went there for supper.

“While we were in Omaha, we had eaten at some really nice, really expensive steak houses,” Mary Ellen comments.

Doug says, “The students kept saying the steaks at Hickory House were the best ones they had ever eaten.”

When asked, Perry will give out at least part of the secret of his steak-cooking wizardry: “Start with a good piece of meat, and treat it with love. Cook it slow.”

When it is just about cooked to the customer’s request, he heats a metal plate on the grill, plops a generous slice of real butter on the plate; adds a dash of Worcestershire sauce and steak seasoning, which comes from one of his best bull customers; gets the concoction sizzling; puts the steak in the middle of it; turns it; then puts the CAB sticker in the middle.

An employee walks by and watches for a minute or two, shaking her head.

“That man can cook,” she says.

Perry’s customers are grateful he does cook, day job or not. He insists it is worth the madness.

“It makes me proud to do it when a customer tells me the meat here is better than anywhere else,” he says.

For more information about Hickory House Restaurant, see www.hickoryhousepulaski.com



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

Angus for the long term

So, just how did a South Georgia boy and long-time Limousin man end up in a purebred Angus operation in Tennessee?

Jonathan Perry grew up working with and showing his family’s Limousin cattle. After declaring he was bored stiff after two semesters at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), he quickly landed a job as show-barn manager at Quercus Farms, a purebred Limousin operation at Gay, Ga. Two years later, he was hired as manager at Dorminy Land and Cattle, another purebred Limousin farm near Fitzgerald, Ga.

While he was at Quercus and Dorminy Land and Cattle, he sold quite a few cattle to Fred Clark at Deer Valley Farm in Fayetteville, Tenn., as well as partnering with Clark on cattle.

“In ’98, he needed a manager,” says Perry. “He was at the end of his rope. I was his fifth manager in five years, and he told me we either had to make it work or he was going to sell out.”

Looking at the long-term picture, he says, “The Limousin breed was not going in the direction that was profitable. Our competition for bulls wasn’t from other Limousin breeders, it was from Angus.”

He and Clark decided they would get 100 head of Angus.

“Within two years we had 700 head and dispersed the Limousin,” he said. Now, the operation has a total inventory of 2,500 head, including 1,100 cows.

“They are so easy to sell and so popular,” says Perry. “They can do so many things. You can have maternal cattle, show cattle, performance cattle, all with the same breed.”

At Deer Valley, the emphasis is on commercial bull production.

“We want calving ease, growth, positive carcass traits, and superior phenotype and structure,” says Perry. They now sell 500 bulls a year with an on-farm sale in the fall and spring, as well as a fall sale in Okeechobee, Fla.

“This is home now,” Perry says. “I can’t imagine life anywhere else.”

For more information about Deer Valley Farm, see www.deervalleyfarm.com.