

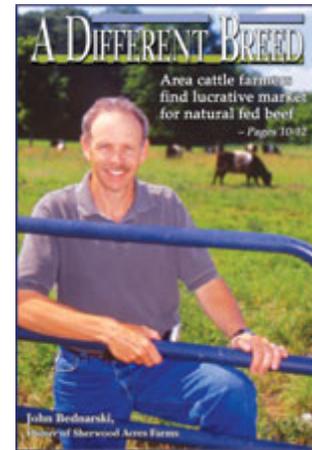
Area cattle farmers find profit in natural-fed beef

La Grange's Bednarski, Henry County's Hunt
among those in specialty market

By Helen E. McKinney
Contributing Writer

LA GRANGE, Ky. (February 2007) – Jon Bednarski's idea of turning a hobby into a profitable business has become a dream come true. Bednarski has found a way to turn part-time farming into a potentially lucrative second career.

From his 50-acre Sherwood Farm on Ballard School Road in La Grange, Ky., Bednarski hopes to raise up to 20 head of natural fed beef per year. His choice of cattle is Belted Galloways, well known for consistently producing high-quality natural beef. Belted Galloways, or Belties, are a Northern-bred cattle originally from Scotland. Bednarski chose them because they are "unique and different," he said. The medium-framed breed also is easy to handle, another plus, he said.



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But what differentiates Bednarski's beef from others is what they eat. His Belties are primarily grass-fed in rotational pastures, which in turn produce leaner beef. They may have a slower growth rate, but they are healthier, he asserts.

The meat is lower in fat and cholesterol than that of other beef. They are thick furred animals, said Bednarski, having almost 4,000 hairs per square inch. This reduces the amount of back fat on them.

The cattle are steroid free and hormone free, so there is no chemical residue in the beef. Their free-range diet is supplemented with corn and soybeans, and they have been raised in a low-stress environment, which makes the meat more flavorful and tender. Bednarski has raised Belties for the last three years, growing them until they weigh approximately 1,100 pounds before shipping them to market.

Bednarski has worked for more than 25 years for Northeastern Log Homes but founded Sherwood Acres in 1991. Bednarski and his business associate, Dan Weintraub, set a goal to provide the local area with a healthy alternative to mass-produced, store-bought beef.

Originally from Vermont, Bednarski didn't know a lot about the natural fed beef market at first, but figured there must be a way to take his hobby a step further. He did his homework and found that "the biggest help to me were the county agents, and visiting farms." He took part in local county extension offerings of Farm Field Days, even hosting one at Sherwood Acres.

He said that the key to being successful in the natural fed beef market is to become knowledgeable about the industry.

Bednarski furthered his knowledge by becoming a certified member of the Master Cattleman's Association. He took part in this year-long course, sponsored by the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

The program is held in multiple counties, said Oldham County Agriculture and Natural Resource Agent Traci Missun. It consists of 10 different educational sessions and two intense days of hands-on training. Every session covers a different topic that includes forages, management skills, nutrition, animal behavior, genetics, reproduction, herd health, marketing and profitability.

"These classes cover the whole gamut of what you need to know to raise cattle and be profitable," said Missun. The goal is in "learning what to do to improve the end product."

Graduates of the Master Cattleman's Program receive a farm gate sign and are honored at the Kentucky Cattleman's annual convention. Missun said there are currently 40 beef producers enrolled in the program.

In the end, beef producers "learn things to be more profitable, what the market demands are, how to be environmentally responsible and how to handle a herd," Missun said. This is the seventh year for the program, which is partially funded with tobacco settlement money.

Dr. Roy Burriss, UK Extension beef specialist who heads up the program, said it is an intense, educational program aimed at beef producers. "We want our Kentucky producers to be able to participate in any market or arena they want to." As long as producers are able to work within the perimeter of what is safe in terms of beef production, they can "meet the requirements of the market," said Burriss.

"We can't profit from something we mishandle," Burriss said. He believes this program can

U.S. Beef Production Statistics:

- There are approximately 800,000 ranchers and cattlemen in the United States.
 - In January 2005, there were 95.8 million cattle in the United States. The average herd size is 40 head. 32.7 million cattle were harvested in 2004.
 - The U.S. beef industry is made up of more than 1 million businesses, farms and ranches conducting business in all 50 states.
 - In 2005, U.S. cash receipts from cattle and calves were forecasted to total \$48.5 billion.
- Kentucky Beef Production Statistics:**
- Kentucky is the eighth largest beef cattle producer in the United States.
 - In 2004, Kentucky Cash Receipts from marketing cattle and calves totaled \$620,650,000.
 - The last estimate of cattle in Oldham County (released March 17, 2006) showed 7,700 beef and dairy cattle.
 - Kentucky is the largest cattle producing state east of the Mississippi River, with 40,000-plus cattle producers.
 - Kentucky is home to more than 1.1 million beef cows.
 - Kentucky ranks fifth in the nation in the total number of farms.

Source: National and Kentucky Cattlemen's Beef Associations

persuade consumers to be more open-minded to farmers producing different things. It helps create a vision for the future.

“Farmers are often positioned as users instead of caregivers,” said Burris. “Most care about the land and are stewards of it,” an idea reinforced through the program.

From the Master Cattleman’s Program, Bednarski obtained information on a Kentucky Department of Agriculture beef marketing cost-share program that paid for half of the initial setup and promotional expenses. Promoting his product right from the beginning is a key factor for him. He has spent money up front for a website, business cards and high-quality literature to distribute in different venues. And his efforts are paying off.



Photo provided

Jon Bednarski’s La Grange, Ky., farm produces Belted Galloway beef cows that are raised on natural grasses and no growth hormones.

When searching for suitable markets in which to sell his product, Bednarski tapped into the already popular farmer’s market venue. “We knew we didn’t want to go into restaurants and chains,” he said, preferring instead to service the county, local farmer’s markets and health food stores. He knew he had a hot commodity because, “people look for farm-raised products.” This where the expertise of his associate at Northeastern for more than 20 years, Weintraub, came in handy. Weintraub’s job is to market the beef because it was “just a natural thing for me to do,” he said.

Weintraub had the sales experience to find viable markets for the USDA inspected beef. He said there is “definitely a niche market by being a small volume producer.” There is also plenty of “room for growth.”

Other farmers are getting into the natural fed beef business. Lonnie Hunt, who lives on Bethlehem Road in nearby Henry County, Ky., began selling natural fed beef in January 2006. Hunt raises 115 head of Black Angus beef cows.

Hunt had taken a trip out west through the Cattleman’s Association and, upon talking to farmers there, decided natural fed beef cattle were the way to go.

“I did not like the steroids and hormones that were being given to cattle,” said Hunt. “I wouldn’t eat that kind of meat myself.”

Semi-retired, Hunt is “trying to establish my business and prove to myself that a farmer can do

this and make a profit.” Hunt is more than willing to share his knowledge of the business with others. Hunt sells his beef directly to the public, even delivering it from his own freezer truck.

“People need to eat healthier,” he said. When a customer buys his beef, they know what they’re getting; there’s no guesswork involved as to where the meat came from. He hopes to get into the Farmer’s Market venue this year.



"People are looking for farm-raised products."

– Jon Bednarski, beef grower

Bednarski’s meat is sold by individual cuts, and a Sample Pack may be purchased for \$75. Sherwood Acres beef is also sold at two Louisville area food stores – Campbell’s Gourmet Cottage and Amazing Grace.

Paul Koenig, owner of the latter business, began selling Bednarski’s product within the last month. With the inventory of Amazing Grace being 99 percent organic, Koenig said he was attracted to the quality of Bednarski’s beef. The fact that there “is a lack of anti-biotics used and the way he treats the animals” ensures a quality product, said Koenig.

“I know there is a demand,” he said. “The taste alone is hands-down.” With more individuals becoming health conscience, Koenig can assure his customers that he knows what he’s talking about when it comes to his offerings. “I do a lot of Internet research,” said Koenig. His managers are also strict about the products they buy. To further attest to the quality of Sherwood Acres beef, the product is now a member of Kentucky Proud, which consists of natural Kentucky grown farm products.

• *To learn more or purchase Jon Bednarski’s natural fed beef, visit: www.SherwoodAcresBeef.com or call (502) 222-4326. To learn more about Lonnie Hunt’s business, visit: www.kycattleco.com or call (502) 543-3683.*