

How we select our beef animals.

We sell most of our beef and bison by the ¼ for processing into cuts.

We also sell a number of beef and bison each year by the 1/10th for ground meat.

In this letter I will explain how I select those animals. I will also answer other relevant questions we frequently get from customers.

The cattle we sell by the ¼ are all beef type heifers, between 18 and 22 months of age.

Most of these animals were born on other farms.

I buy them in the spring as heavy calves or yearlings.

A farmer can choose many different business segments.

Farmers who have a herd of cows to produce calves for sale, have a “cow-calf” operation.

If you drive through north central Minnesota or the Dakotas, you will see large pastures with cows and calves together.

Those farmers are cow-calf farmers (or ranchers).

Normally those farmers sell their calves to farmers like me. We then “finish” the animals for meat production.

To “finish” means to grow the animal until it is ready for harvest.

If while driving through the country you see pens of larger cattle, with feed bunks and no pasture, those cattle are in a conventional feedlot.

Feedlots can be enormous with many thousands of animals crowded together. They have nothing to do but eat. Mostly corn.

The vast majority of beef animals are finished on corn in feedlots.

When you buy meat in a store or a restaurant, if it is not labeled “grass fed and grass finished,” it was finished in a feed lot.

Many labels on foods read “natural.” Natural on a label means almost nothing.

We feed all our beef and bison grass or grass hay only. No grain.

A few farmers have cows and finish their own calves.

I have done that in the past.

Now, we keep only a few beef cows so we can devote our pastures to finishing animals.

If most of the animals we sell were also born on our farm we could only finish and sell about one-third of the number we do now.

I personally select each beef calf that we raise and finish.

Our animals are produced by small cow-calf farmers in central Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

Animals I select eat grass or grass hay only.

They have not been given hormones or other unnecessary medications.

We do in fact have a herd of bison cows.

And one bull, Bill.

These are just business choices we have made.

Prospective customers frequently ask what breed of beef animal we sell.

The answer is that most are of hybrids of British breeds.

Cattle breeds are normally identified as either beef or dairy types.

There is a third classification designated dual purpose. Dual purpose animals fit best on small farms. They are not rare but not numerous either.

Almost all the cattle breeds found in the northern US originated in Europe.

Most of those breeds are from England and Scotland (British breeds).

Dairy animals are selectively bred to produce milk. Much more than nature requires for a calf.

As you would expect, dairy animals do not produce as much meat as beef breeds.

Bull calves from dairy breeds are normally made into steers and then raised for "dairy beef."

Dairy beef is OK. Their meat is relatively lean. However, these animals are not bred to gain weight on grass. They are almost always raised on a heavy grain diet.

Beef animals on the other hand, are selectively bred to produce excellent meat on grass.

The large black and white animals you see along the road are probably Holsteins. Holsteins are a dairy breed. In recent decades Holsteins have been intensely selected for extraordinarily high milk production.

To produce huge quantities of milk the Holstein cow is confined and fed an extremely high energy diet.

The natural life span of cattle is around fifteen years. The average life expectancy of an intensely used Holstein cow is five years or less. They break down orthopedically and their organs fail.

Not all dairies treat their animals this way, but most do. That was not what I intended to write about. Pardon the digression.

I was raised on a dairy farm in Otsego. My father and later my brother raised Jersey dairy cows. Jerseys are the beautiful petite cows frequently seen in movies.

Jerseys and Guernseys, related dairy breeds, were developed on the British islands of those names.

The all-black animals you see along the road are most likely Angus. There are both black and red Angus breeds. The black variety is much more common.

Animals that have a white face and brown body are likely Herefords.

Angus, Herefords, and a number of other popular beef breeds are from England or Scotland.

The large whitish animals are Charolais. They are of French origin.

Angus, Hereford, Charolais, and many other breeds of cattle are named after the area where they were developed.

Angus and Hereford are counties in Britain. Charolais is a province of France.

There are many other breeds and color patterns.

If you are interested in knowing more about cattle breeds use the link below.

www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/cattle

All domestic cattle developed from the Aurochs of Europe and the Middle East.

The cows you see in movie or photos of India are Brahman. They are grey with a pronounced hump and big floppy ears.

Ranchers in the southern US have developed several unique American breeds. These cattle are a combination of the British breeds and Braham cattle. These southern breeds are better adapted to the heat and high humidity of coastal states.

You can recognize them by the hump and floppy ears.

Some farmers and ranchers raise one breed of cattle exclusively. They are in the business of selling breeding stock to other farmers and ranchers.

Farmers who have a cow-calf operation use cows of one pure breed and bulls of a different pure breed.

That produces hybrid offspring. Hybrids are healthier and grow faster than purebreds.

That fact is true in many organisms, both plants and animals.

Most beef animals intended to be raised for meat are hybrids.

As I mentioned above, we keep only a few beef cows. We keep those cows to be herd leaders and matriarchs for the calves we buy each spring.

We graze those calves until harvest in the fall.

I buy heifers because they finish younger and smaller than steers.

Most of the animals you see in our herds are hybrids.

That means that in general they grow better but it also means they are of many colors.

Frankly, I like that.

Occasionally I will get a contact from someone asking if we have Angus beef animals.

They have been led to believe that Angus cattle produce superior meat.

In fact, about half of our animals will have Angus breeding, either black or red.

Overall, Angus beef animals are not superior to animals of other good breeds.

Every beef breed has some excellent and some poor animals.

About 30 years ago the Angus breed association started an advertising program to promote Black Angus. That program has been remarkably successful.

It has been successful in getting people to believe black Angus are the best eating, not in improving the breed in any way.

I was recently in a store and saw a Hereford meat section. That means the Hereford breed association has seen the Angus breeder's success. The Hereford people are using the same advertising tactics.

Good genes matter, but many breeds have good genes.

Other factors such as diet and lifestyle matter even more.

In the spring of the year, I personally select each animal that we raise and finish for you.

In the fall, I select those animals for harvest, as they are ready.

I harvest once a week, starting in September.

On that day I carefully select eight animals (beef and bison) in the right condition.

The animals are young and naturally gain weight rapidly in the fall.

Some animals that are definitely not ready for harvest in early September are in excellent condition by November.

Even though I select carefully in the spring, some animals do not finish (grass fatten) well enough by late fall.

Those animals are then designated for ground beef.

Occasionally I purchase a cow that is for sale because she failed to produce a calf.

These animals are otherwise healthy. Because they did not produce and nurse a calf, they are in good physical condition.

The cows have been grass fed only and are not medicated. No hormones or routine antibiotics are ever given to brood cows.

Such cows, along with younger animals that did not finish as well as required, are offered to you by the 1/10th for ground meat.

Best regards. Tom 2014