



*Clockwise from top, Photo 1: Sunburst Beef cattle in the field near Waynesville; Photo 2: Sunburst Beef female with Hyatt Barn in background, both by Joye Ardyn Durham; Photo 3: Black Angus at Charles Shook Farms, Big Sandy Mush; Photo 4: Charles Shook caring for new calf, both by Katrina Ohstrom; Photo 5: Three generations of the Hyatt Family at Sunburst Beef including newly born twins, by Joye Ardyn Durham*

# Farm philosophy and the art of raising local sustainable beef

by Frances Figart and Tina Masciarelli

Farmers are as varied in their approaches and opinions as any other professionals, but common among them is their commitment to the long-term stability of their farms as well as their shrewd philosophizing on the current and future state of farming. Out on the land tending their herds, farmers are analyzing and strategizing from dawn to dusk. One of the issues they are passionate about in western North Carolina is the environmental and financial sustainability of raising local beef.

While the global appetite for beef drives deforestation and increases the demand for factory farms and confined animal feeding operations, regional farmers are finding that small is not only beautiful, it is also a means of restoring the land and returning local beef to the regional marketplace.

As in many businesses, the best way to raise beef sustainably is to remain small and diversify. Take, for example, ten-year-old Gaining Ground Farm in Leicester, which focuses on selling a wide variety of vegetables directly to downtown restaurants, tailgate markets and CSA members. Owners Aaron and Anne Grier tend a herd of Red Devon cattle, a small-framed breed that thrives on their 70 acres of mountain pasture. “We have 25 mama cows and keep the steers for beef and heifers for breeding stock,” says Aaron Grier. “They are docile and thrifty, often eating weeds and briars that other cows turn their noses up at.” These are not commercial cows geared towards the stockyard and are not profitable when taken to the butcher before two years old. “Our cows are part of our diversified vegetable farm in terms of the bottom line. They bring in the same amount of money as, say, a crop of garlic or potatoes, not something to base a business off of, but important in the overall picture.”

At the other end of the sustainable spectrum is Ridgefield Farm in Brasstown, which houses anywhere from 500 to 1,200 Braunvieh and Angus on 1,023 acres. The farm operation provides more than 20 full-time jobs. “We actively manage our land, pasture and forest alike to maintain a healthy ecology that supports organisms at every level,” says owner-operator Steve Whitmire, whose family has been

farming in western North Carolina since the 1700s. “From a sustainability standpoint, through rotational grazing, cattle can help control the growth of noxious weeds.”

## VARIATIONS ON THE GRASSFED THEME

One practice that sets small cattle farming operations apart from larger industrial ones is pasture grazing. But, as Whitmire points out, the standards and definitions currently characterizing what’s being sold as “grassfed” are quite loose. “It means different things to different people, producers and consumers alike,” he explains. “To some, it may mean the animal has consumed nothing but grass its entire life. To others, it may mean the animal has consumed grass for most, but not all, of its life.” Different still is a unique “free choice” system like the one Whitmire employs at Ridgefield where the cattle are not only always on grass but also always have access to a non-GMO corn silage-based ration, which he calls “cow kimchi.”

Hickory Nut Gap Farm, in Fairview, employs a grassfed/grass-finished program for its 45 or so black and red Angus, South Poll and Devon herds that range over 90 acres. “We finish cattle on grass, hay and baleage depending on the time of year,” says Jamie Ager, who grew up on the farm and now runs it with his wife, Amy. “We

do not feed any corn or soy, which are predominantly GMO.” A self-proclaimed perpetual permaculture student, Ager believes managing and maintaining a grassland ecosystem is critical to keeping biodiversity within the landscape—and the best way to do this is with a grazing herbivore. “Grazing cattle on pasture builds organic matter and regenerates soils,” he says. “What’s exciting is that we are creating a healthy product, an environmentally sound product—soil regenerative, biodiversity enhancing—and a humane life for the animals.”

Yet another variation on the grassfed theme is the “grass only” method employed by Adam Henson at Shady Brook Farm in Canton, where 30 some purebred Black Angus are raised on 60 acres of mixed grass and woodland. “After the drought years of 2008 and 2009, I began researching alternative production models that would allow us to pursue our passion and come closer to turning a profit,”

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~Adam Henson, Shady Brook Farm, Canton



# Beef roundup

## Ridgefield Farm, Brasstown

brasstownbeef.com

Purchase Brasstown Beef from Ridgefield Farm store Fridays and Saturdays, on menus throughout the Southeast, in Whole Foods, Ingles, and specialty butcher shops.

## Hickory Nut Gap Farm, Fairview

hickorynutgapfarm.com

Purchase from Hickory Nut Gap Farm store, North Asheville Tailgate Market, Asheville City Market, West Asheville Tailgate Market (April through November) and many other vendors and restaurants listed on the website.

## Cold Mountain Angus Beef, Waynesville

828.734.4099

Facebook: Cold Mountain Angus Beef

Purchase online: coldmountainangusebeef.com.

## Sunburst Beef, Waynesville

828.648.6157

Facebook: Sunburst Beef LLC

Purchase from Sunburst Beef Farm, Haywood Historic Farmers Market in Waynesville (May to October), Coffee Cup Cafe in Clyde and Church Street Depot in Waynesville.

## Shady Brook Farm, Canton

828.507.5746

Facebook: Shady Brook Grass Farm

Purchase from Asheville City Market, Historic Haywood Farmers Market, Waynesville.

## Gaining Ground Farm, Leicester

gaininggroundfarm-nc.com

Purchase from North Asheville Market, Asheville City Market, River Arts District Market from April through November.

## Charles Shook Farms, Big Sandy Mush

To be on a list for future local purchase, email [beebranchfarm@gmail.com](mailto:beebranchfarm@gmail.com).

## Sandy Mush Farm, Big Sandy Mush

Contact Dave Everett at [kdegeneva@hotmail.com](mailto:kdegeneva@hotmail.com) about farm, conservation, land management issues.



*Charles Shook's Angus cattle roaming the family farm in Big Sandy Mush by Katrina Ohstrom*

says Henson, who represents the ninth generation on this land and operates the farm with his father, Doug. What began as an exercise in profitability research turned into a philosophical “aha” about the role of land stewardship as Henson made connections between failing public health and large-scale agricultural production models. This led to a major shift in his thinking about how holistically managed farms can be a driving force as a producer, employer and shaper of societal values. “Managing a holistic farm and marketing farm products directly causes the farmer to stop looking at their farm products as sources of income and people as customers,” says Henson. “Instead we are involved in the ministry of providing good food.”

Lucas Sorrells of Cold Mountain Angus Beef near Waynesville grew up around cattle in a family that has been farming in western North Carolina since 1790. “We have always had a cow/calf operation and would sell the yearling calves at the livestock market,” he says. “Over the last few years, I decided to get into the retail market and process and sell our own grassfed beef. We feel like people want to know where their food comes from and they want to know how it was raised.” Currently farming alongside his grandfather, father and brother, Sorrells has about 80 head of Black Angus cattle on some 300 acres on multiple farms. “The health, happiness and wellbeing of each animal is a major priority for us. Our grassfed operation has multiple benefits, both environmental and for the animals. By working toward grazing cattle all year round, the quality of our pastures and hay fields have improved. Our animals also seem to be happy and stress free. We feel like this leads to a better quality beef.”

In his book *Grassfed to Finish*, Allan Nation writes that the number one problem with grass only beef—and promoting it to the public at large—is consistency of flavor. Grain is a taste equalizer allowing beef to be slaughtered year-round with no real compromise to flavor. This is why the steers and heifers at Sunburst Beef near Waynesville are fed a high-protein finishing ration of corn, soybeans and cottonseed meal until they reach 1,150 to 1,200 pounds. The 25 pairs of Angus and Hereford have no confined feeding area on their 38 acres and graze on pasture at all times. “They simply get a little extra ration in the evenings,” says Vicki Hyatt, who handles marketing while her husband, Rich, and son, Cole, focus on production. “While we do offer some grassfed-only beef, we find our customers prefer the marbling that comes from supplementation that provides for a more tender and

tasty end product.”

Rich Hyatt’s family has been on this farm more than a century and Vicki Hyatt was raised on a cattle ranch in Montana. She says for those who care about the quality of their food, how their food is produced and the quality of life the animals have, sustainable operations are the answer. The Hyatts took an intensive course to get their Beef Quality Assurance Certificate and learned about various animal handling systems, including the “bud box,” a system that follows one of the natural instincts of cattle as articulated by Temple Grandin, known for creating more humane slaughter facilities for livestock. “Cattle naturally want to go back the way they came in,” says Hyatt. “By instituting a modified form of this system, we have made working cattle a one-person operation when necessary.”

## CONSERVATION AND AGRITOURISM

A true one-person cattle operation is that of Dave Everett, whose herd in the Big Sandy Mush valley in the northwest corner of Buncombe County is maintained at no more than 30 Angus and Baldy cows and heifer calves. After purchasing his century-old 130-acre Sandy Mush Farm in 2001, Everett and his wife Kim set an intentional course for continued, sustainable agricultural use through a permanent conservation easement administered by the Buncombe County Soil and Water Conservation District. “The easement brings a legalized stability to the land, eliminates much doubt about our farm’s future or worry whether the next generation will manage it wisely, allowing us to be better present-day stewards,” says Everett, whose cattle do not qualify as grass-fed, he says, but fall into the less defined category of very contented, pasture-raised beef. “The fact that western North Carolina has become a popular place to live and visit makes it incumbent upon landowners to responsibly conserve their mountain landscapes,” says Everett, who advocates mitigating our environmental impact by growing healthy foods, controlling use of chemical contaminants like pesticides and herbicides, ensuring humane animal treatment, preserving open spaces, and improving wildlife habitat and water quality.

Everett’s neighbor Charles Shook is the ninth generation to farm his family’s 600 acres in Big Sandy Mush, and four generations currently live on the farm, along with 250 pairs of Angus cows. Throughout the years, cattle here have enjoyed grazing on mountain pasture, and have received winter supplementation of dry hay, corn silage and baleage as needed, most of which has been grown on the farm.

“There is a conservation easement on our farm and farms that I lease as well,” says Shook, who worked with Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC) on the plan. “It keeps the land from being sold for development, which makes our farm life more sustainable for my children and future generations.”

SAHC also holds the conservation easements on Hickory Nut Gap Farm and land leased by Gaining Ground Farm, while Mainspring Conservancy (formerly Land Trust for the Little Tennessee) conserved 867 acres of Ridgefield Farm.

Jamie Ager of Hickory Nut Gap Farm sees agritourism as another important conservation tool. By inviting visitors to the farm, agritourism creates the opportunity for on-farm markets as an additional outlet for direct sales to consumers, while increasing economic stability for farmers. “We believe it is important to share the family farm experience with folks so they can understand

the what, why and how of sustainable farming as well as the touch and feel of real agriculture,” Ager says. “Education is a big component to building a better food system.”

Big Sandy Mush and Leicester will be the site of a new farm heritage trail created and managed by Buncombe County Soil and Water Conservation District, which local farmers like Everett and Shook foresee will increase agritourism in their area—and throughout Buncombe County.

“While the percentage of Americans with firsthand knowledge of farming operations continues to plummet, a hundred percent of us still consume agricultural products,” Everett says. While he admits small farms can never replace industrial scale agriculture, he’s optimistic that small farm production will continue to offer “a number of alternatives for the informed consumer, from organic vegetables to beef raised on grass pasture.”



Rich Hyatt with the Temple-Grandin inspired “Bud Box” and Mama cows at Sunburst Beef, both by Joye Ardyn Durham