

Lasater Grasslands Beef: A Case Study on Natural & Sustainable Meats

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Overview

The Lasater Ranch has a rich history in the cattle business, going back to 1882, when it was established in South Texas. Lasater Ranch is responsible for the development of the Beefmaster cattle breed, which was developed by Tom Lasater, and was the second cattle breed recognized as originating from the United States (the first recognized breed being Santa Gertrudis). Tom developed this breed as part of a ranch program focused on raising cattle in harmony with nature. Tom is quoted as saying “Nature does all of the thinking and most of the work.” As the ranch progressed, Tom decided to expand, but South Texas was experiencing an energy boom in the late 1940’s and land values were high. Because of this, the cattle herd was moved to the short grass prairie country of Matheson, Colorado.

Lasater Ranch is currently managed by Dale Lasater, one of Tom Lasater’s sons. Dale took over management of the ranch in 1985, and has continued to embrace the program and the cattle that his father developed. Dale’s commitment to keeping the ranch in harmony with nature is as strong as ever. As Dale puts it:

For more than half a century the Lasater Ranch has been a wildlife sanctuary. There is no poisoning, hunting, or trapping on the ranch. Like the bison, our cattle co-exist with coyotes, deer, prairie dogs, pronghorn antelope, rattlesnakes, and other wildlife. Believing that working with nature is the best policy, many years ago we implemented practices that helped restore the natural balance between animal species, domestic livestock, land and man.

The Cattle

The Beefmaster breed of cattle is a composite of Hereford, Shorthorn and Brahman. The approximate mix is 50% Brahman, 25% Hereford and 25% Shorthorn. Lasater’s herd has been closed since 1937, meaning only Beefmaster bulls produced by Lasater Ranch are used in breeding future generations. From the beginning, Tom Lasater believed in utilizing multi-sire pastures for breeding purposes, as this fit better with the success of wild animals in nature. For many years the sires of the calves were unknown under this management system. However, in the mid-1990s, the ranch began using DNA paternity tests to identify the sire of each calf produced, allowing them to put more selection pressure on the bulls, as well as to sell bulls with known sires.

Tom established six criteria by which all breeding cattle are selected, including disposition, fertility, weight, conformation, milk production, and hardiness. At the Lasater ranch, breeding takes more than just pedigree and good looks; all breeding cattle are put to the test of the six selection essentials. Adherence to this strict set of standards leads to 15-20% of the herd being culled each year. To compensate for this, the ranch retains 85% of the heifer calves. This is just



another example of how the ranch works with nature and not against it. “We’re not going to decide which ones (heifers) are the best ones, we’re going to let nature tell us which ones are the best ones,” says Andy Duffy, a ranch manager for Dale on Lasater Ranch.

Each year the elite calves are utilized in the breeding program. Additionally, Lasater sells around 100 two-year-old bulls each year. All other calves, approximately 200 per year, are placed into the Lasater Grasslands Beef program.

Grasslands Beef

As with the other facets of Lasater Ranch, the Grasslands Beef cattle are managed in harmony with nature. All calves are raised without antibiotics, pesticides, hormones, growth implants, animal by-products, or steroids. Additionally, calves are never confined in a feedlot environment. Calves are fed hay during periods of heavy snow, but the ranch only plans on feeding hay about two weeks out of the year.

Lasater ranch utilizes rotational grazing management practices with their Grasslands cattle. According to Dale, “Our cattle—like the roaming herds of bison once did—harvest grasses, till the soil with their hooves, fertilize the ground (via that most natural of processes) and then are moved to fresh pastures, leaving the grazed plants to fully recover. When the pastures are rested (typically 70 to 80 days), the grasses develop to their full potential—growing extensive root systems that help them survive drought.”

The calves in the Grasslands Beef program are harvested at roughly 24 months of age by family-owned, USDA-inspected packing plants. To help assure a high quality, tender product, all beef is dry aged in a controlled environment for 14 to 21 days.

Marketing Strategies

Lasater Grasslands Beef is marketed utilizing three different avenues: direct sales, Internet sales, and retail sales. This multi-pronged approach has helped to broaden the customer base and create a steady demand for the product.

The ranch has been selling Grasslands Beef directly to customers for over 10 years. Direct sales customers are mostly from the surrounding area, but word of mouth has traveled far and today their direct sales customers are spread out all over the United States.

Lasater Ranch’s website, www.grasslandsbeef.com, allows customers to order beef and have it shipped anywhere in the United States. The beef is shipped frozen, on dry ice, using two-day air mail. The website also allows the Lasater Ranch to share their history and philosophy with potential customers. The website focuses on the Lasater heritage, their commitment to nature, the high quality eating experience of their beef, and the health benefits of eating Grasslands Beef. Below are a few examples of the products currently available online (all prices as of early 2008):

- The Family Sampler (\$175.00): The Family Sampler includes 36 lbs of assorted cuts wrapped in white butcher paper, including roughly 8 lbs of steaks, 12 lbs of assorted roasts and other cuts, and 16 1-lb packages of ground beef.
- Assorted Steaks (\$132.00): This order comes with 4 Ribeye Steaks, 10-12 oz each; 4 New York Strip Steaks, 10-12 oz each; and 4 Top Sirloin Steaks, 10-12 oz each.
- Filet Mignon (\$70.00): The Filet Mignon package includes 4 individual steaks, butterfly cut, at 8-10 oz. each.



- Ground Beef (\$25.00): The Ground Beef order includes 5 1-lb packages of 90% lean ground beef. This is one of Lasater Ranch's most popular items.

The third approach to marketing that the Lasaters utilize is supplying beef direct to retail establishments. Grasslands Beef is available in over fifteen different "natural food" grocery stores in the Denver and Colorado Springs, Colorado areas. The product offerings at these stores are similar to the products available online.

One of the biggest challenges for niche market producers is distributing the whole carcass. Direct and retail customers often demand only specific products from the carcass such as roasts, steaks and ground beef. In 2008 Lasater Grasslands Beef was able to come to an arrangement with a local Whole Foods Market store in Colorado Springs for delivery of one fresh carcass per week. This agreement allowed for the potential to grow the number of carcasses delivered per week depending on the demand. Lasater Grasslands Beef sees arrangements like this one as the future of their business. In fact, in Andy Duffy's opinion, "Given the changes in our environment, with demand for corn increasing due to ethanol production, and fuel prices escalating, the future for many cattle producers is supplying local markets with fresh grass-fed beef."

Conclusion

Lasater Ranch has found success in niche meat marketing due in part to using a variety of niche marketing strategies outlined in this publication. Perhaps the most important of these strategies is Lasater Ranch's diversified product offering: not only is Lasater Grasslands Beef natural and grass-fed, the beef is harvested from livestock that has gone through a rigorous screening process, including DNA testing, to ensure that the integrity of the meat, the livestock, and the ranch adhere to their own strict standards. Maintaining such strict standards has the additional effect of linking the product (brand) name with quality and consistency. This branding strategy is further impacted by the information the ranch shares on its website. In addition to explaining their philosophy and the benefits of natural, grass-fed meat, the website introduces the members of Lasater Ranch and explains its history (the "farm/ranch story"). Lasater Ranch's marketing strategy is also diversified, as the ranch sells its product directly to customers, in retail stores, and through the Internet. This approach allows the ranch to reach customers outside of their immediate region, while also mitigating the risks associated with reliance on a single customer base.