



FROM PASTURE *To Plate*

By: Patricia Long

Oklahoma's Premium Natural Beef is committed to producing the safest, highest quality beef in the marketplace today

Scanning the horizon south of Hobart, Oklahoma, there are several surprises that meet the eye. The first and most obvious are the mountains that rise from this productive valley floor.

For more than a century, these mountains have also anchored the lives of ranchers who call this place home.

The second surprise is Premium Natural Beef, a nationally acclaimed branded beef product that was started by two local ranchers, CR Freeman and Kirk Duff. The lifelong friends decided a couple of years ago to commit themselves producing not only quality cattle, but also quality, all-natural beef for consumers around the world. Driven by a desire to increase rural sustainability and help ensure their families' future on the land, they turned to what they know best: raising quality, safe and nutritious beef – but on a much larger scale than anyone could have ever predicted, and in a way that no one could have ever imagined.

The impact of their effort has been profound. During this year alone,

ranchers involved in the program will sell 20,000 head of all-natural Angus calves sold through the program. Most of these cattle come from Oklahoma, although the production alliance includes ranchers from as far away as the Dakotas and beyond. All of the cattle are finished at two feedyards near Hobart.

And, Premium Natural Beef is sold not only by grocers across Oklahoma, Texas and Kansas, but also prepared by some of the finest restaurants in those states as well.

"Our families have made a commitment to producing the safest beef in the world," says Freeman. "We control everything from the genetics to the feed to the finishing to the processing of this product. It's a product that our own families enjoy, and we want the families around the world to have the opportunity to try it, too."

Adds Duff: "It really comes down to this: If it's not good enough for our families, it's not good enough for anyone else's. We're committed to ensuring quality and safety at every step in the production and processing of our product."

A TIGHTLY CONTROLLED PRODUCTION SYSTEM

At the heart of Premium Natural Beef is a three-tiered commitment to quality and safety:

First, all cattle are Angus, with many having a similar genetic background.

Second, all cattle spend time in our feed lots before harvest, ensuring they are fed the same quality ration. Third, Premium Natural Beef harvests all cattle between fourteen and twenty-one months of age, guaranteeing the beef is at the ideal point to create a choice, flavorful product.

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Some of the local producers involved in raising grain and cattle for Premium Natural Beef are: Pat Sherle, Creede Sherle, Todd Duff, Terry Heller, Dallon Heller, Brett Porter, Zack Harris, C.R. Freeman, Craig Rose, Wes Farris and Kirk Duff.

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That commitment begins with genetics that come from Duff Cattle Company's Power Plus Genetics, an innovative seedstock operation that has focused on producing Angus cattle with unsurpassed forage efficiency, muscling and marbling.

"One of the biggest reasons for inconsistent beef product is poor genetics. Weak genetics mean cattle produce steaks with wide ranges of marbling, fat, and size," says Freeman. "Using Angus genetics typically produces beef with a more ideal amount of marbling and tenderness. However, there is still a range of meat quality within the Angus breed. Many of the ranches that provide us with natural beef use the Power Plus Genetics program. These Angus genetics are considered among the best in the industry.

"We think we're just at the tip of the iceberg of having the most environmentally friendly beef feeding program," continues Freeman. "Through these genetics, we're able to get our cattle at optimal weight at 40 to 60 days less than typical cattle. And what that means is these animals have consumed less grain. That animal has been able to get to the marketplace at a lot younger age – and that makes the cow base back at the ranch that much more efficient. If that cow can have a calf that makes it to the plate in 16 months instead of 30 months, that makes the ranch that much more efficient and profitable for the long run."

The quality of the cattle has also been astounding. More than 95% of Duff-sired cattle have graded Choice or Prime, providing both superior quality and consistency that the program needs to meet and exceed the demands

of its customers.

Calves that qualify for the program are managed under strict, all-natural protocols. Ranchers must use Duff genetics to ensure quality and consistency. The cattle never receive antibiotics. They never receive hormones. They graze fresh grass on all-natural pastures. And, all groups of calves are source and age verified.

Finally, all of the cattle are harvested at under twenty-one months of age in a low-stress environment that ensures Premium Natural Beef is always tender.

Ranchers involved in the production system benefit greatly for their participation, which improves their economic sustainability. They receive no discounts for shrink when shipping their calves. They pay no sales commissions, and they receive a premium price for their naturally raised calves. Once weaned, these cattle are fed at one of two feedyards near Hobart. Their ration consists of all-natural, locally raised forages, corn and barley. Their pens, bunks and waterers are kept clean to protect their health. And they are monitored continuously to ensure the quality that's been built in during each step along the way continues.

The end result is a product that is consistently juicy and tender, possessing an unmatched flavor profile. And local restaurants and retailers have been quick to recognize the value of selling Premium Natural Beef to their customers.

"We believe there is no other closed-loop system like it in the country," says Kirk.

BUILDING CONSUMER DEMAND

Considering Premium Natural Beef was launched just a couple of

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years ago, consumer acceptance of the product has been unprecedented. Not only is the product featured by nearly 50 restaurants and retail chains in Oklahoma, Texas and Kansas, it's also available online through gift boxes, which allows consumers across the country to purchase the product directly from the company.

"Our gift boxes allow consumers the flexibility to purchase whatever they're looking for," says CR. "We offer everything from grill packs to roasts to steaks, prime rib and samplers. It's really expanded the scope and reach of what we do."

One of Premium Natural Beef's largest retail partners is Minneapolis-based Kowalski's Markets, a family-owned company specializing in high-quality, natural and locally raised food.

Kowalski's focuses on building strategic partnerships with ranchers and farmers, says Boyd Oase, who manages the nine, upscale stores. "We appreciate the consistent quality of the product – and the fact that it's raised naturally and humanely," he says.

The Ranch Restaurant is one of Oklahoma City's finest eating establishments. Center to its success is the consistent quality that Premium Natural Beef provides.

"Without quality and the consistency of quality that we get from Premium Natural Beef, we could not be successful," says Sheri Westover.

"Someone can't come in one day and have an excellent steak and tell their friends and bring them in the next week and not have that same quality. So the commitment that Kirk and CR have made not only to quality, but also to consistency, is really what makes the difference."

Travis Word, who manages all of Crest Foods locations in Oklahoma City is also excited about the chain's recent decision to begin selling the product. He believes consumers will not only appreciate the consistency of the product, but also the fact that it's raised by ranchers who are committed to environmental sustainability and humane handling practices.

"You can't get any better than what we have here," says Word, as he surveys the meat case now filled with Premium Natural Beef. "It's a wonderful, all-Angus product. It's natural. It's raised the right way. It tastes great – all you need is salt and pepper. That's it." Lacy Vardeman, who proudly sports a "meatatarian" t-shirt, runs a ranch catering business in Texas. Her family not only raises cattle for the program, but also prepares premium natural beef for their catering customers.

"We really appreciate the fact that there is such a commitment to quality – from the ranch to the consumer," she says. "When Kirk and CR first started talking about Premium Natural Beef, we knew we wanted to be a part of it. We also

knew it would give us a way to sell the best beef in the market today."

MOVING FORWARD

In the end, Premium Natural Beef has become a win-win for all – everyone from the Oklahoma ranchers who raise this affordable yet high-quality product to consumers across the country who enjoy it so much.

The effort underscores the fact that a commitment to quality and food safety will always prevail. And when good people commit themselves to quality and to producing an unmatched product, great things can happen.

And, like those old mountains that rise from the Oklahoma prairie, Premium Natural Beef no doubt will anchor the ranchers who live here not only to their past but also to their future.

"This is one of the most complete, pasture-to-plate programs that you'll find anywhere in North America today," says Freeman. "This product is grown right here. We know everything about it. This is the same product that we feed our own families. Our kids can even eat the feed out of the feed-bunk that these cattle eat. The water is human-grade water. We're taking this to new levels to ensure that this product is the safest and the highest in quality in the marketplace today."

For more information, visit www.premiumbeef.com or www.powerplus-cattle.com.



Photos by Crystal Young, American Angus Association

