

GABRIEL FAMILY FARMS

Ohio Wagyu

By Heather Smith-Thomas

Troy Gabriel and his family owns an equipment dealership—Franklin Equipment—in central, County, Ohio and also raises Wagyu beef on his families 750-acre farm near Ashville, Ohio. “The farm was purchased in 1995, and is owned by my parents Gary and Betty Gabriel and my family. It had been an Arabian horse breeding operation and the former owners also raised a few cattle. We started off with Quarter Horses ourselves, and then in 1999 we bought a commercial Angus herd—a group of first calf heifers,” says Troy.

“We raised Angus for about 6 years and in 2007 I was at a trade show in Orlando, Florida and had an opportunity to have a Wagyu steak at a steak house. This was my introduction to the breed. After I ate that expensive steak and realized it was the best steak I’d ever had, I had no idea what Wagyu cattle were. So while I was at the airport to come home, I Googled Wagyu cattle and learned something about them,” he says.

“I happened to have a business colleague who knew Dr. Henry Zerby and Dr. Francis Fluharty at The Ohio State University. They both had done a lot of research in the U.S. and in Japan on Wagyu. I befriended Dr. Zerby and Dr. Fluharty and learned more about the breed. Then we bought 2 Wagyu bulls that we used on our Angus cow herd. We kept some of the F1 cross heifers and slaughtered the steers for beef in 2010. They gave us excellent carcass results, better than what we had been getting using Angus bulls on the same cows,” Troy explains.

“We kept some of the halfblood females and started breeding them AI to a Wagyu bull from Crescent Harbor Ranch; 068 Bull and also used the Z278 bull on those F1 heifers. We have evolved the cow herd since then to where about 95% of the cows are F1 or high percent Wagyu today. We have 90 Wagyu cows, including 15 fullbloods. We bought 8 fullblood cows and bred heifers 2 years ago from the Empire State dispersal sale, and a couple more fullblood bulls, so we keep expanding our Wagyu herd,” he says.

The farm now includes 750 acres. “It’s all contiguous or nearby, where the cattle are pastured. We grow them on an all-natural program, and are not using any growth hormones or antibiotics. If we have a sick animal we treat it and market it a different route. Because we don’t have very many outside animals come into our farm, we’ve had very few sickness problems. The cattle are born here and finished on the same place. We don’t have cattle coming in and bringing new diseases or mingling with other cattle; so we don’t have ‘kids going to kindergarten every day’ and bringing home something. So we’ve had great health success,” he explains.

“We quarantine any new animals. When we brought in the fullblood animals that we purchased, we quarantined them for 60 days before they had access to our other cattle. This is an advantage for health,” Troy says.

“The cattle are all fed grain and hay raised right here on the farm.” The cows are on pasture in summer and graze cornstalks in winter. After weaning, the calves go into a feedlot on the farm and fed a ration containing corn and hay that is grown on the farm. They are started on a 50-50 hay-corn blend (ground on-site) and finished on a ration that is roughly 10% hay and 90% corn.

The Wagyu cattle grow more slowly than other beef animals, and this seems to improve the carcass quality. Thus the goal is not rapid weight gain, but slower growth to enhance the beef quality. Most of these cattle are processed after about 24 to 30 months of age, after gaining about 2 pounds per day. Currently the goal is to increase the rate of gain a bit and try to find the right balance between production and meat quality.

Customer response has been enthusiastic and consistent. There is clearly a taste difference and tenderness difference, and more demand for Wagyu products than the farm can supply. Troy says that their customers appreciate the all-natural program and the fact the cattle are grown without hormones or antibiotics.

“We are proud of the fact that we have the best of both worlds; we are a metropolitan farm only 40 minutes away from downtown Columbus, but clearly in the country. We are proud of our animal husbandry, and our natural program,” he says.

Many of the people buying their product are friends and business associates who were already paying a premium for beef at Whole Foods, but are even happier knowing this farm and where the cattle come from. They feel good about eating meat from Gabriel Family Farms because they know these cattle are raised with care and never leave the farm until they are harvested. The biggest attraction, however, is the taste. As people become familiar with the exceptional taste of Wagyu, they start to look for it.

The beef is processed locally, dry aged for 28 days, and then brought back to the farm and stored in a freezer for distribution. Most of it is sold privately via the farm's website and at Blystone Farm and Butcher Shop, but Gabriel Family Farm recently began shipping some of the cattle to Nebraska for nationwide distribution.

Future plans include raising more fullbloods and purebreds (breeding up to 15/16ths Wagyu from the original F1 cross) and also to continue to raise some beef from crossing with Angus. "The 3/4 to 7/8 animal is more than adequate from a meat production standpoint and carcass quality. We are very happy with the quality." It's higher quality than most Americans are accustomed to eating.

"With our fullblood cattle, we plan to start selling fullblood bulls and embryos, and a few females as we start growing our herd. We will keep some for ourselves and then make some available as breeding stock to other people," says Troy. The plan is to get a lot more bulls out to other cattlemen to use on Angus females, and then to buy back the calves at a premium price.

"One thing we will be embarking on this year is to try to get local farmers using our bulls. We have a big club calf industry here in Ohio. The first calf heifers that those people are breeding are generally AI bred to club calf bulls and using a herd bull for cleanup. Given the calving ease and good temperament of the Wagyu, we have a few club calf breeders who are going to use our bulls as cleanup bulls on their first calf heifers. The ease of calving will be a big plus," he says.

"If the result is a steer, it will make a great feedlot steer, and they will get a premium at market for that. We also think we can get some really nice F1 heifers from those matings, since they will be breeding very high quality first calf females. They may be Angus, Simmental, Chianina or some other breed, but we think this might make a good combination to get some F1 breeding stock," explains Troy.

"We are also putting a program together to have a seminar day on February 17th here in Columbus, in conjunction with Imperial Wagyu Beef—the company we are selling our fat cattle to. We will be trying to recruit cattle producers in our area to use Wagyu bulls and set up a premium to have a guaranteed price over market, to buy their weaned calves the following fall. We finish those cattle and then sell them by the truckload to Imperial," he says.

About 25% of the marketed cattle in the Gabriel herd are sold by private treaty, slaughtered at a USDA-approved plant and packaged. "The meat is sold privately to friends and associates. We have an advantage being close to a major metropolitan market. People who are used to paying \$69 for a steak at a steakhouse are happy to be able to buy that same steak for \$25 a pound.

Seth Cooksey is the farm manager and has been there 18 months. Seth has worked with cattle all his life and enjoys working with the Wagyu. "He is responsible for all aspects of the farm, particularly the breeding and enhancing the breeding program. He does the AI and works with the embryologist on implanting the embryos. We also utilize IVF technology, as well," says Troy.

"The goal of our program is to be able to consistently finish the highest quality carcasses in the U.S. We want to be able to brag that we have the best ribeye. This is how we got into Wagyu cattle, because I love a good steak. I figured out pretty quickly that we can create a better steak than I can buy at a restaurant," he says.

The majority of people in the Wagyu industry are non-traditional cattle producers. Seth went to the American Wagyu Conference a few months ago and found this very interesting. "From our perspective, to have a herd of 60 or 30 or 20 commercial cows and just sell the calves through the livestock auction, it's hard to ever make any money at that. You are at the mercy of that kind of market and have no incremental value to sell. This is what we liked about the Wagyu, from a business perspective. This is what we do every day in our equipment business—try to figure out how to differentiate ourselves from our competition, and how do we become a price maker as opposed to a price taker," explains Troy. In addition to the great taste, he liked the opportunity to develop a herd in which he could have something to sell at incremental value and be paid a premium for it.

AGRICULTURAL ROOTS

"Our family is a New Holland dealer in Ohio and we have 3 locations with this dealership. The Wagyu business is important, but it is Seth's job to do that because our family spends most of our time with

the dealership and we also have a manufacturing business. The New Holland dealership is our direct connection to agriculture, since hay and livestock is the bread and butter of the New Holland brand. It is focused on making hay, and all the equipment that is important throughout that process. We do a lot of business with cattle producers,” he says.

“Secondarily, our interest was piqued in the cattle industry, because my two daughters (and Seth, as a young person) showed cattle through their entire 4-H careers on a local and national level. My daughters continue to do that today. Brianne is 22 and Kendra is 18. Kendra is still showing and Brianne is too old to show at this point but maintains her activity with cattle. In Ohio we have what is called the Best Show Circuit, which is a subsidiary of the Ohio Cattlemen’s Association. This is a show cattle points system that involves 20 shows throughout the year. Depending on how you do in each show, you earn points. From these they award show champions and end-of-year season champions as well,” he says.

“As a family and as a business (Franklin Equipment) we are very involved in that program. It’s a youth development program and we sponsor a scholarship every year for the kids. We are a title sponsor of the Best series. Background data on this is available on www.oca.org. There is a tab on this website where you can click on the Best program, which tells about the show cattle circuit that runs in Ohio. Even though Ohio is not considered to be a big cattle state, it has one of the best show circuits in the U.S. These shows are very well attended and very competitive on a national level,” says Troy.

“Our kids being involved in 4-H ever since they were 10--and old enough to do it--is part of how we became more interested in the cattle industry. We continue that program with a herd that Seth manages, consisting of 30 show calf cattle that we are calving this year. This is a combination of our own females and embryos that we purchased from other breeders. We have an annual fall show cattle sale in September where we sell these show calf prospects,” he explains.

“Our older daughter will be graduating in May in business management. She is currently working fulltime in our equipment dealership and will continue to do so. Our younger daughter is enrolled in Ohio State University in Animal Science. She wants to become a beef geneticist and beef nutritionist,” says Troy.

The youngest future showman is Seth’s daughter, Payton, who is 3 years old. “She already knows more about cattle than most people and enjoys helping around the farm.”

MYTHS ABOUT WAGYU

“There seems to be a lot of misunderstandings and myths about this industry. People think that in order to create the great Wagyu steak you have to massage the cattle and feed them sake and beer. This is not true. We are getting feed conversion rates that are very similar to that of a commercial cow herd. We are not finding that many differences. Yes, we have a higher cost of production but in terms of the premium we are getting for these animals at market, we are getting a better return on our investment than we were when raising commercial cattle.” There is enough of a premium that a person can afford to take the extra time and effort involved in growing these cattle.