

Farmer Brown—

Providing Grassfed, Animal Welfare Approved Meat for the Educated Customer

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Annette Brown and her husband, Todd, operate a grass-based meat-production farm on 45 acres in Vermont (near Enosburg Falls), producing beef, pork and poultry. “We have red and black Angus for our beef, heritage mixed breeds for our pigs, and we also have laying hens and do meat birds in the summer months on pasture,” she says.

“I grew up on a dairy farm near here, and bought my land in 1995. To begin with, I had horses and my farm was just a hobby. I milked cows at my parents’ farm. When I met my husband and got married, he moved here to the farm with me and we started raising more animals, just for ourselves”, Annette says.

“We started out with a few animals just to provide meat and eggs for our own family, and then we had people asking us about meat to purchase. We started raising meat for the community, and it grew from there. Our customers enjoy what we produce, so we started selling our meat retail in 2010. We have a website people can order from, and I do two farmers markets during the summer months and the website goes along with that; people can order whatever we have in stock, from the website. Then I deliver it right to their home or they can pick it up at the market,” Annette explains.

There are also several co-ops in the area that buy meat from their farm, along with a few stores. “Our farm name is Farmer Brown, so this is our meat label. The beef is grassfed under the

AGA label, and our farm is AWA (Animal Welfare Approved),” she says. The customers know what they are getting, and how the animals were raised.

The chickens and pigs are fed organic grain. “We are working on getting an organic certification for our animals. This is another important thing that our customers are looking for. They are happy right now that we feed organic grain. We mention that on our display at the farmers’ markets. I think we would get a few more sales with the organic label on the meat, however. People are very aware of these things. They want food that is non-GMO; this is very important to a lot of customers,” she says.

“The AWA label was very good for our customers to know about. Some of them recognize it right off and are very happy about it. Others don’t know what it means until we tell them. Then they are really pleased with it.” Part of a farmer’s job is simply to educate the public about their food.

“When we started marketing our beef as grassfed 6 years ago people were puzzled and asked, don’t all cows eat grass? They didn’t understand the difference, and that grassfed means no grain. I have a few customers who can’t have any grain in their own diet, and many people don’t understand that if the animal has

eaten grain and you eat the animal, you are getting grain and may still have health issues. Now people are starting to understand that you are eating what the animal eats. People are becoming better educated about their food, to help them stay healthier,” Annette says. It is always a good program to take the time to educate customers and the public about their food and where it comes from.



The Browns’ dairy cows are Jersey crosses. They are moving toward starting a raw-milk micro-dairy.

The Right Mix

“We finish 8 to 12 beef animals each year. Currently we have 17 adult cattle plus our finishers. A lot of our pork goes to a senior living community; they buy 2 whole pigs from us every other month and break it down themselves in their own kitchen. This provides a steady market for our pigs. We also have some customers who like to buy a quarter, half or whole animal each year and they can have it cut however they want it for their family. We sell beef in quarters, halves and whole, and pork as halves and whole. Our customers can save a little money that way, or they can buy it by the cuts, out of our freezer. Right now we have 3 sows and one just had a litter of 8 piglets and the others are due soon. We have 12 other pigs of varying ages, mostly finishers, right now.”

With the cattle, Annette and her husband strive to select genetics for efficient grass finished beef. “We brought in a new bull 4 years ago and have been raising his offspring a couple times over now. When we feel we need a new bloodline we’ll buy a young bull as a yearling from someone and raise him up over the winter and then he’s ready the next year to go with the cows,” she says.

“Because we are short on acreage, we can’t keep very many heifers, to raise as cows, but we usually keep one or two each year. We are trying to go more toward the Lowline Angus because they have better feed conversion on grass and are very efficient. We bought our original cattle in 2008 and they were a larger breed Angus. So we are slowly downsizing them, breeding them to smaller bulls. When we



The Browns feed their chickens and pigs organic feed as the demand is high for organic products for their market. They are working toward organic certification as part of their marketing plan.

got our bull he was short and stocky—and not as big. We are breeding him to our larger cows, but also culling out the cows that don't produce as well on grass." It takes time to get exactly what you want; selecting and breeding livestock is always a work in progress.

"We also have two dairy cows, a Jersey and a Jersey cross, and my husband and I want to eventually have a small raw milk dairy. We are working toward that right now. I've noticed that the Jersey cross (part Holstein) is too big for what I want. I am feeding her more, and getting less milk than we get from the Jersey. So we are looking to move toward a Jersey dairy.

Creating a Holistic Business Plan

"My husband and I went to some grazing conferences and signed up for some newsletters, about 4 years ago. One of the e-mails that came to us at the signup mentioned the beginning farmer class for women. Because it was only offered for women, I went to it, although my husband would have loved to go. He did go to a couple classes with me, where they allowed the partners to attend. This helped, because ordinarily I would come home from the class and try to tell him what we did, and he would have other questions, and I'd have to tell him that I would have to ask those the next time I went. It was better when we could both attend, and be on the same page."

She participated in this beginning farmer program for women through the winter months that year. "This helped us focus on what we needed to do for marketing and branding our product. It helped us write up a business plan to see where we wanted to be heading. It helped us focus in on what we really wanted to do," she says.

"This helped us figure out how to get an accurate account of how much we were putting into these animals, to make sure we are getting

enough return on our product," Annette says. Often people go eagerly into a farming project or business but spend more on it than they make.

"Our prices per pound, for our customers, were way low when we started, because we didn't want to overcharge people. After going through that class we took a closer look at our business and separated all our little enterprises. With the beef we had to separate out the cow-calf pairs and the finishers. They each had their own individual sections and we needed to see which ones were making money or not. It helped us to see what we were supposed to be doing and where we needed to be headed," she explains.

Goals for the future include getting more acreage, to be able to expand their meat programs. "Right now we have 45 acres and are leasing an additional 40 acres from neighbors. We'd like to purchase a farm about twice the size of what we have, so that we can expand our beef herd. We are selling our product out too quickly. We only harvest during the growing season because its grassfed beef and we can only finish these animals during summer months. By the next April we are running out of our supply for customers. We had two beef that we held off butchering last year; they could have been finished in October/November, but we held them off so we could finish them early this spring because we were going to be out of meat. We ran out of ground beef in February though we still had some of the other cuts."

The demand exceeds the supply, but that's a



The Browns market most of their pork to a senior living community nearby.

good problem to have, with people wanting the product. "It is important now for people to know where their food comes from. They like to know that these animals are born on the farm, and we raised them up until harvest time. It's important for us to be able to grow our herd to match our needs, but without enough grass land we can't quite do that yet," says Annette.

So she and her husband are looking for a larger farm. "When I purchased my land, it was not very expensive. It was all woods, so I started from scratch, clearing the fields. We've been looking at farms, and some of the ones we've looked at need almost as much work; we'd have to start clearing the land all over again! We've been putting all our efforts into this piece for 20 years, but it's just not enough land given our market," she says.

Acquiring more land is clearly the next major business move for Farmer Brown. But with their holistic goal to guide them, the Browns are better equipped to use the tool of human creativity to determine the best way to address their resource conversion challenges now that they've addressed their marketing weak link. 🌱