

NATURAL GRASS-FED BEEF COMES TO MARKET

The New-Old “Valley View Dairy” in Chimacum

BRWYN GRIFFIN, Staff Writer

Originally printed in *The Co-op Commons* (August/September 2009)

What does a fourth generation farmer do when the dairy farm he operates is no longer financially viable? Look into going organic. What happens when going organic is too costly, even after investing over \$50K? Look into the next generation of beef production and create a new local label of beef raised in Chimacum. Natural Grass Fed Beef, now available in The Food Co-op’s freezer section, is where Roger Short, owner of Valley View Dairy in Chimacum, has decided to put his time and money. He’s also decided to bring on his 34-year-old son, Kevin, who until recently was a lifeguard and swimming instructor. Kevin is currently the marketing end of the business and admits that until a few years ago he was uninterested in farming, but has since had a change of mind. Additional farm labor is provided by Santo Escalera, who lives on the farm with his wife Rosa and takes care of the herd.

Local More Important Than Organic

Short’s Natural Grass Fed Beef operation raises primarily Angus cattle, all pasture-fed once weaned on a rotational grazing program. Currently, Roger has about 85-90 adult head of cattle and 76 calves on the farm. According to Roger, the Angus breed finish better on grass than other beef cattle and have a higher Omega-3 level than grain-fed beef. When asked about organic production, Roger affirmed, “Local is more important than organic today because you know the local farmer’s practices. I use a bit of herbicide along the fence line and some antibiotics to treat specific needs in the herd, but neither is used much.” The herd gets supplemental “haylige,” fermented grass hay he produces during the summer to feed the cattle in the winter (look for the big white-wrapped “marshmallows” stacked on the farm, haylige in process). The herd also gets a mineral supplement with copper, a mineral deficient in our soils, and wormers for lice, grubs and lung worms.

Roger told stories about his frustrating experiences dealing with federal regulators and his reasons for eschewing organic certification. He remembers experts telling him to plant canary grass that subsequently clogged Chimacum Creek, which runs through his property, reducing the oxygen available to the creek’s fish. When the professionals were called out to determine the safety of the salmon in the creek, Roger was told, “Fish don’t need oxygen.”

Loving the Wild Creatures

A self-admittedly controversial figure at local council meetings, Roger nevertheless sees himself as both a farmer and an ecologist. He said, “it’s not about salmon, it’s about control,” when talking about local activism. To protect the raptors that find the farm a source of food, Roger insisted the local utility company install roosts on top of the utility poles after many eagles were electrocuted, along with the reflectors hanging from electrical wire to discourage landing. “We haven’t had any birds killed since reflectors were installed,” Roger stated. There’s also a flock of swans that regularly land on his property to feed and rest during their long migratory journey, something he seemed very proud of. I got the sense this was a traditional farmer who loved the land and the wild creatures that make the farm their home.

No Local USDA Certified Slaughter House

The biggest obstacle to success in Roger’s plan for Natural Grass Fed Beef seems to be the distance from Chimacum to a USDA-certified slaughter facility, a requirement for packaged resale. For the packaged beef currently available at The Food Co-op, the cows were hauled to Portland for slaughter and processing, then packaged and frozen. Roger plans to take his next slaughter-ready cows to the Beef Shoppe, a mobile facility between Centralia and Chehalis, to Farmer George in Port Orchard, or to

Thundering Hooves in Walla Walla. He hopes a local mobile facility is on the horizon as the Puget Sound Meat Producer's Co-op continues to meet and discuss the possibility at the Grange in Gardner. Roger hopes that one day he won't have to transport his cows at all, representing a concern not only for the quality of the beef he brings to market but also for the last days and hours of his cow's life.