

*Ranch family
strives
to exceed
consumer
expectations.*

BY JOHN MADAY



I'M A
DROVER

**Chapman Family
Ranches**
CLARKSVILLE, TEXAS
Commercial cow-calf
operation

Barney Chapman
OWNER

TEXAS TENDER

EVEN AS HE FACES ALL THE DAILY CHALLENGES that confront a rancher — volatile weather, rising input prices, unpredictable markets — Barney Chapman always thinks about the consumer. And Chapman, who with his extended family operates Chapman Family Ranches based in Clarksville, Texas, knows consumers. ¶ While the Chapman family takes pride in seven generations of Texas ranching, Barney also has considerable experience in the food business. In the early 1960s, he worked in the family's wholesale meat business, which processed 250 to 500 beef carcasses each week. The business sold beef to the restaurant trade, and he says the experience

taught him about beef quality and the benefits of dry aging.

Around that same time, he entered the restaurant business, purchasing Dairy Queen franchises. He eventually became the chain's largest franchise owner, with over 100 restaurants.

This experience, he says, combined with his passion for ranching, gives him a unique perspective on the entire pasture-to-plate beef system.

When the Chapmans began building their Brangus-based herd for their Clarksville ranch, they made the decision to focus on beef quality, along with the production traits so critical for profitability.

So in addition to using EPDs and ultrasound tests in genetic selection, Chapman purchases DNA-tested bulls and semen from tested sires from Camp Cooley Ranch,

Franklin, Texas, which uses Bovigen's system of DNA tests. The Chapmans insist on tenderness and marbling ratings of at least seven and feed efficiency ratings of five or better. The family uses AI on all heifers and about a third of its cows, which Chapman says allows the operation to afford to use top DNA-tested sires.

"We're now going back and re-testing bulls purchased before the DNA tests," he says, adding that he plans to split the herd, with one group composed entirely of sires meeting the standards for tenderness, marbling and feed efficiency. Eventually Chapman also hopes to use DNA testing for all replacement heifers, toward a goal of building a cow herd with every animal rated for tenderness and marbling.

Already, though, the family is taking an uncommon approach by testing steer calves for DNA markers rat-

ing tenderness, marbling and yield, then selecting top steers for finishing and direct marketing to consumers.

Last fall the family tested 10 calves, and four of the 10 passed the ambitious requirement of a tenderness score of seven or better and nine or better for marbling and yield grade. This year, Chapman is expanding the program to test 50 steer calves. The family will sort off the steers that make the cut, and finish them on the ranch on a hay- and whole-corn-based diet.

Steers that don't qualify go to a commercial feedlot for finishing and marketing through conventional channels.

Chapman says the family is developing a Web site, www.TenderTexasBeef.com, where it will list the availability of beef for sale directly to consumers, primarily in whole- or half-carcass quantities. The site also will include information on beef cutting and retail yields to help customers understand how much beef, and which cuts, they will receive. Customers can, if they want, select the individual steer they purchase. Chapman says he plans to follow the product through processing and aging at a local plant to assure quality and to verify the customers receive all the beef for which they paid.

Chapman also is in discussions with two major grocery chains that have expressed interest in stocking his locally produced, guaranteed-tender beef in area stores. His goal is to create a niche market that will increase returns to the ranch, far exceeding the cost of DNA testing and superior seedstock.

NATURE AND NURTURE

While DNA tests provide a good indicator of an animal's ability to produce tender, well-marbled beef, the Chapmans also work to manage their cattle in ways to ensure they reach that potential.

The family selects cattle for calm temperament and emphasizes the use of low-stress animal-handling methods throughout the production process. He avoids using electric prods, and Chapman says he teaches his processing crew that its job is not to work cattle fast but to minimize stress. "The goal of the ranch is for the cattle to always have a good day, without any sickness and as little stress as possible," Chapman says. "Less stress makes more tender and better tasting beef."

The family also starts young calves on creep feed, using a product from Land

O'Lakes Purina Feed that limits intake while introducing some starch to the calf diet. Research indicates, Chapman says, that including starch in a calf's diet early in life improves its ability to deposit marbling later.

The combination of good genetics and careful management appears to pay off. Chapman says he has fed steers at Hondo Creek Feed Lot at Edroy, Texas, and collected performance and carcass information to apply back to selection and management.

Records from the feedyard show the Chapman steers averaged 3.6 pounds of daily gain. At the packer, the cattle averaged just under 80 percent USDA Choice, compared with a plant average of 43 percent, and dressed at 66.5 percent compared with a plant average of 62.5 percent.

Chapman also sees benefits on the female side of the calf crop. The family sells virtually all its heifers as bred replacements, earning significant premiums over the feeder-cattle market. ✓