

FINISHING BEEF ON ALFALFA

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Powell Farms All Natural Grass Fed Beef
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Powell Farms started in 1996 with 15 acres of Alfalfa hay intended for cow/calf feed. A neighbor and his friends bought every bale that year. Over the next 14 years the only alfalfa hay our cows got to eat was when a cutting got wet and was rolled. As with any business when the economy starts to take a downward trend, it is wise to start looking for new and innovative ways to market your product.

Around 2010, the national push for locally grown and all natural / organic products was really just starting to take a stronghold across the nation. In 2008, the Farmers' Market of Murray – Calloway County opened for business. As the Extension Agent, I was attending the market every Saturday talking with the vendors and the local consumers trying to help build up the market in the infant years. Throughout the market season, consumer surveys were taken asking for what products they would like to see at the market. Nearly 100% of the surveys came back saying that they would like to have locally produced natural / organic meats. After seeing these surveys and talking with the consumers, it was apparent that there was a market for all natural grass fed beef.

Knowing that I had access to a beef herd and that none of the current vendors of the market had plans to expand into the livestock business, I started researching what the requirements were to market meat through farmers' markets. Thus Powell Farms All Natural Grass Fed Beef was born. This enabled me to be able to still be at the market every Saturday to help the market along while at the same time offering yet one more product that was not currently offered at the market.

During the 2009 market season Powell Farms had still not made the switch to All Natural Grass Fed Beef. Throughout the season we marketed the calves that we had finished out the previous year as we had always done in the past on corn, DDG's, hay and pasture. At that point and time, my father was still not sure that a calf could be "finished" on nothing but grass and alfalfa. After much encouragement and prodding, I was able to convince him to at least give it a try. We started with a couple of big steers on good pasture and at the end of summer moved them to a small lot with spring water, shade and limited pasture. They were hand fed twice a day and received about 20 lbs total of 20% crude protein pure alfalfa per day for about 60 days. By the time the calves were ready to slaughter, they averaged a live weight of around 1300 lbs and a carcass weight of 780 lbs. These two steers were marketed through the 2010 season.

This continued to be the process that we would use for the next couple of seasons. We would select the calves that we wanted to finish out for the upcoming season and then feed them 20 lbs per day for 60 days. Throughout this time we continually noticed the amount of waste that would be left on the ground around the feeders. Knowing that there had to be a better way to feed and not have all of the waste, we started looking for new ways of packaging the hay for the calves. After a little research we decided that we would try grinding the hay. It took a few attempts to find the right combination of grinder screens to use, but eventually we were able to come up with an end product that we were happy with.

Once we started feeding the next round of calves, we started out feeding the 20 lbs / day as we had always done in the past. It did not take long before we realized that no longer did we need to feed 20 lbs so we started backing it off a pound a day until we got to the point that they were eating everything that was placed in the feeders. Eventually we ended on 15 lbs a day and no waste. So not only were we able to eliminate the waste, we were able to reduce the amount of hay each calf received each day and still have the finished calf that we were looking for.

Currently we are still using these methods to finish out calves to sell to our clientele. While we are definitely not the largest producer of grass fed beef, we have been able to deliver a high quality product to our consumers and on average market 6 – 10 calves a year with little or no advertising. The ultimate goal is to eventually be able to market every calf produced on the farm directly as freezer beef, however until then it is still enough to keep me playing golf when I want and to put money aside for the family vacation each year!