Couple aims for niche grass-fed beef market

Dotting the side of a rolling hill, that is part of Buffalo Hills Ranch, are British White and Red Angus cows and calves who quietly chew tallgrass prairie.

With the exception of brome grass, planted in the 1930s to stop dust caused by drought and wind, the animals eat native grasses, according to John Kugler.

“Switchgrass, big and little bluestem, sideoats gramma, blue gramma, indiangrass, buffalo grass,” he rattles off.

In 2008, John and his wife, Katie, bought what used to be the Lemmer place (where the owners started raising cattle in the 1890s) and started raising grass-fed beef.

At the time, the couple had retired and moved from Washington State, where John—who grew up in the Mojave Desert—was an alfalfa breeder.

Katie, of Lincoln, met John years ago while both were students at the university.

“We’d travel through here with our kids to see the grandparents in Lincoln and we loved driving through the Sandhills,” John said. “We wanted to settle back here.”

“Back here” is the ranch, tucked away at the end of a long, winding gravel road, northeast of

Cozad.

John explained that they market all natural grass-fed beef, and do not implant hormones or use growth-producing antibiotics. However they do not sell organic beef, since the couple can treat their herd for infections like pink eye and pneumonia. (see graph on page 2 for choices of Nebraska beef).

Traditionally, all cattle were grass-fed.

But with less expensive corn, fed for quicker weight gain, John said producers began feeding grain to cattle.

The Kuglers noted several benefits of grass-fed beef. Some include:

leaner meat with a type of fat that is healthier and higher in omega-3s, beta carotene and Vitamin E. Omega-3s are considered essential fatty acids that can boost heart health and lower triglycerides.

John noted research showing a better ratio of good to bad fat in grass-fed stock, which can lower the risk of heart disease.

higher concentrations of conjugated linoelic acids (CLA) and omega-3s.

John described CLA as good fat that research has shown to lower heart disease and may be a potent cancer fighter.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educators point out that an average 3.5 oz. serving of beef, whether it be grain-fed or grass-fed, contains only a fraction of the omega-3 fatty acids (8% vs. 13%) or CLA (10% vs. 25%) recommended in the human diet.

a lower potential of contamination from E-coli strains that survive better in the digestive tracts of butchered grain-fed cattle.

John said it takes more feed to raise a 1,600-pound animal, finished at a feedlot, compared to one weighing 1,100 to 1,200 pounds. The latter is the approximate finish weight for Kugler cattle, which are a smaller breed than standard-size animals.

Still, grass-fed beef is not for everyone.

John said cattle finished on grain have more marbling, which makes the meat juicer when grilled.

“Grass-fed beef does taste differently than grain-fed, mainly in the mouth, in terms of feel,” he said.

Adjustments must also be made when cooking meat grown entirely on the range. John said it needs to be cooked longer, at a slightly lower temperature.

The Kuglers raise and sell their cattle, or portions of them, primarily in May or June, when the animals have the highest concentration of (CLA) and omega-3s, John said.

Once a sale is made, when the animal is two years old, the Kuglers take the steer to one of three different processing plants in the area.

Customers decide what cuts of meat they would like and the animal is harvested.

Although they've not yet made a profit during their three years of raising cattle, the Kuglers are hopeful that will happen over the next several years as they build up their 50-head herd and get the word out about their grass-fed beef.

"Our goal is to provide a healthy alternative," John said.

For more information about grass-fed beef, visit www.eatwild.com.

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