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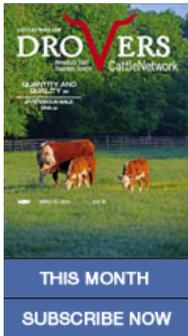
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## This Month in Drovers

### I'm a Drover: Broad perspective, local marketing

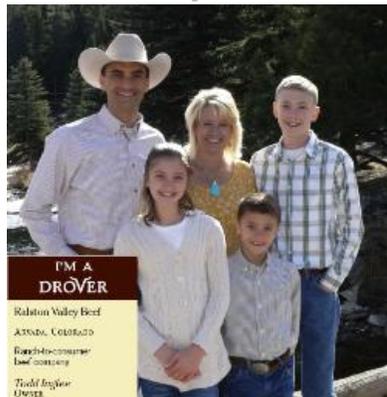
John Maday, Managing Editor | Updated: April 12, 2012

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Even an inherited ranch doesn't come with a guarantee of success, and for anyone wishing to build a cattle business "from scratch," the challenges can be daunting. But with some creativity, motivation and a little help from friends, beef production offers opportunities even for beginning entrepreneurs.

Todd Inglee lives in Arvada, Colo., a suburb of Denver, with his wife Kim and three young children. From there, he operates Ralston Valley Beef, running cattle on nearby leased properties and selling beef to consumers hungry for locally produced foods.



Inglee's story shows there are opportunities for young people to become involved in beef production without inheriting a ranch or cow herd. It also illustrates the value of experience. Inglee believes his years of employment with trade associations and private industry, and the contacts and networks he developed along the way, served as invaluable preparation for his entry into the beef business.

Inglee began working for the Colorado Cattlemen's Association in 1994, soon after college graduation. His next job took him to NCBA, followed by employment with eMerge Interactive, a company that pioneered traceability and data-management technology for beef cattle, and at Colorado Serum, an animal health company. Beginning with his time at CCA, Inglee had the opportunity to meet and become familiar with leaders and innovators from across the beef business in Colorado and nationally. One of his early contacts at CCA was Colorado rancher Harold Yoder.

Yoder encouraged Inglee to become involved in beef production and eventually helped him secure financing to purchase his first cow herd. Yoder, Inglee says, became his "cattle mentor" and has helped guide his career since then, as well as assisting others to get started in the business. Over time, Inglee and Yoder partnered on numerous cow-calf and yearling enterprises, and Inglee says he benefitted greatly from Yoder's knowledge and experience.

In his "day jobs," meanwhile, at CCA, NCBA, eMerge and Colorado Serum, he developed personal networks and learned from experts across the industry. But over his years working for associations and allied industry, Inglee says he persistently felt drawn to the production side of the beef business, and he and his wife eventually decided to chase their dream.

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THE DECIDING FACTOR

The Inglees had been custom-slaughtering a few finished cattle to sell sides or quarters of beef to family and friends in the local area, and decided to expand the concept and market their beef more broadly. Their situation provided a unique opportunity, as the family's suburban location offers ready networks and contacts with local markets and consumers. At the same time, they have access to grazing land in multiple nearby locations.

Inglee reached an agreement with Yoder, who purchases feeder cattle for the program, grazes them on his ranch on the plains east of Colorado Springs and finishes them in his feedlot. Inglee's family also owns a small ranch in the mountains west of Denver. He explains that his parents moved to town just before he was born but continued running some yearlings and growing hay on the family ranch. Today, his parents and siblings work in non-agricultural areas, so Ralston Valley Beef leases the pastures and grazes cattle there during the summer. That arrangement led to additional leases of neighboring properties, Inglee says. He also found that some property owners in the largely residential areas west of Denver want to retain agricultural designation for their land for tax purposes and are willing to lease the grazing rights at below-market prices.



Inglee finds that Longhorn-Angus crossbred feeder cattle fit his customers' size, grade and price preferences.

Ralston Valley Beef purchases cattle from Yoder and processes them locally in a USDA-inspected plant. All the cattle are managed and marketed as natural, with no use of implants. Yoder sources feeder cattle from a limited number of area producers who adhere to natural production protocols and who raise cattle of the program's preferred breed type — an Angus and Longhorn cross.

Inglee says the Angus-Longhorn crossbred cattle fit the needs of his program for several reasons. The crossbred calves are hardy and adapted to range conditions, and they do not carry the price premiums of some more common breed types. Most importantly, their carcass traits address the preferences of the company's customers. Ralston Valley's customers want beef that is lean but flavorful, and prefer packaging in smaller portion sizes for home cooking.

Building on meeting more of his customers' needs, Inglee commits to the added expense and scheduling effort to dry-age every carcass 21 to 28 days. He says consumers realize and value the benefits the process brings to the flavor and tenderness of beef.

Cattle for the program spend most of their time on grass, followed by a short 70- to 90-day finishing period in the Yoder feedlot. This process results in relatively lean carcasses with ribeye areas somewhat smaller than typical. The combination of breed type and management system provides beef with just enough marbling and thick-cut steaks of the preferred size. The system also keeps beef prices reasonable compared with most custom-cut or specialty meats.

Ralston Valley also offers grass-finished beef for customers who order it. Inglee says he has the option to keep cattle on forage to finishing weight but will do so only if he knows the beef has a buyer. Otherwise he moves the cattle to the feedlot on the usual schedule.

Initially, the company focused on selling whole, half and quarter carcasses to customers on a custom-cut basis. Once that business was established, the Inglees expanded into selling packages of individual cuts, which requires working with a federally inspected processor. When a family buys a quarter or half of a steer, Inglee says, it is out of the beef market for months, so selling individual cuts improves cash flow while reaching new customers who prefer to buy meat in smaller quantities. In addition to marketing beef directly to consumers, the company supplies some local restaurants and is pursuing opportunities with retailers in the area.

For customers who buy larger quantities, Inglee and the processor work closely with them through custom cutting, providing the cuts and portion sizes they prefer. Inglee then delivers the beef directly to customers' homes or businesses.

Inglee relishes direct contact with consumers, saying he constantly has opportunities to tell the story behind his beef, explain how cattle are raised, such as the differences between grain- and grass-finished beef, and answer any questions people have. This interaction, he says, builds repeat business and demand growth through word of mouth, while helping suburban consumers gain a better understanding of beef production.

Inglee also makes a point of keeping his message positive. The company markets beef as natural and focuses on telling its story about where and how the cattle are raised, but without any negative messages about beef from conventional production systems.

Inglee has focused on improving the range environment and forage resources on his family's ranch and his leased properties, installing fencing and water sources to accommodate rotational grazing systems. This spring, the National Young Farmers Educational Association recognized his efforts with its national 2012 Environmental Leader Award. So now when his suburban customers ask about the environmental impact of beef production, he has another story to tell them.



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**Jim Dyer**

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Fort Davis TX | April, 18, 2012 at 04:30 PM

I had the pleasure of meeting Todd when he worked for NCBA a few years back and later sold him a Big Bend Trailer that he uses in his business. He was a pleasure to work with and a real class act.

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