

Princess Beef grows happy cows



One of Princess Beef's hundred happy cows grazes rich pasture on Fruitland Mesa near Crawford.

**By Rita H. Clagett,
North Fork Bureau Reporter**

"We're trying to emulate nature long ago, where you had huge herds of bison that would roam around and stay in a tight herd, kept together by predators. They'd plow up the ground with their hoof action, which allows rain to penetrate the earth and soak in more, and drop manure which is fertilizer, and seeds, and then they would move off and go to a new spot, and they wouldn't come back for quite a while."

Cynthia Housewart, founder and proprietor of [Princess Beef](#), explains the concept of Holistic Range Management, which she uses to raise the grass-finished beef that has made her family business a growing success in the North Fork Valley. Housewart started about 15 years ago with one cow and her calf, and has gradually increased the Princess Beef herd with a careful eye on genetics. This year she sold almost 40 steers to 100 eager

customers who had all signed up by June for October delivery.

"Come meet us. Come see what we do," says Cynthia. "Know exactly what you're eating. We sell out every year. Next year we'll give repeat customers first chance at ordering early, then open it up."

We're talking at the Housewart family ranch on Rogers Mesa west of Hotchkiss, which has been in the family for a hundred years. Cynthia's husband Ira works in his metal shop across the driveway from the farmhouse. Tiny gingerbread houses made by Cynthia and Ira's two daughters decorate the table, and homemade ornaments hang from the Christmas tree.

"I graduated from Colorado College," Cynthia says, "and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I had lined up a variety of things for that summer... I started my adventures with a cattle drive at the Allen ranch." Steve and Rachel

Allen were early pioneers of Holistic Range Management in the North Fork Valley, on their ranch at the west end of Fruitland Mesa south of Crawford. Cynthia Butterfield, at the time, went on some other adventures that summer, but, she says, "I came back to the Allen ranch, and never really left after that. That was in '93."

A couple of years after she started working for them, the Allens gave Cynthia a cow she named Princess, and her calf. That was the beginning of Princess Beef. About the same time she was starting her herd, she learned of Jo Robinson, an investigative journalist writing about the [benefits](#) of raising animals on pasture. Robinson has identified hundreds of peer-reviewed studies from the 1960s to the present that show that

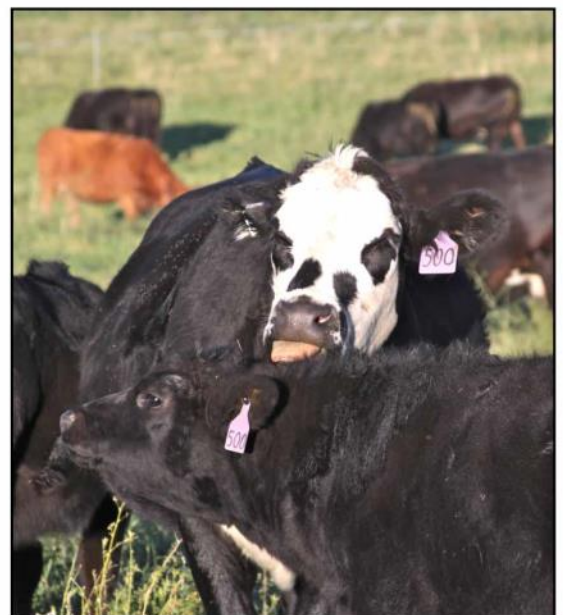
raising animals on pasture is good for the animals, the environment, farm families, and the health of consumers. Cynthia based her nascent business on this theory, and started selling the steers to friends and family, keeping the females for the herd. And the rest is, well, history.

In just over 15 years, she has built a herd of a hundred healthy, happy bovines who provide dozens of customers with clean and delicious beef.

"I think the thing that makes Princess Beef special is that we have our animals from birth all the way to slaughter," Cynthia explains. By selective breeding, she has grown a herd of smaller cows that are "more efficient" and thrive on grass.

While they will use antibiotics if an animal is sick, she explains, they don't sell it as Princess Beef, it goes to the sale yard. "What we've found is our animals are not sick very often, because they're not stuck in a corral or feedlot on their own manure. They're out in the open fresh air and clean pastures, and rotated frequently. We just don't have those problems."

That brings us back to the concept of holistic management. "Holistic management is where you form a goal as to how you want to see the future and work towards that. All our decisions we try and go back to that goal. My goal is to make ranching and agriculture sustainable. It isn't, really, right now,



Calves are weaned at about six months old, usually across a fence, which makes the process less stressful for everyone.

Grass-finished beef better for all

especially if you're playing a commodity market, and the packing houses sort of run the prices on beef.

She continues, "The other thing is how we manage the animals. I try to improve the ground with animal impact. In the long run it's more sustainable because you're not doing it with machinery. You're doing it with animals, that are putting on weight, that you will then make money on. It's like harvesting free solar energy and making money off of it. You improve the soil, you improve the pasture, you improve the animals, then we eat it, it's all around a good thing."

Houseweart uses electric fencing to keep her herd in one section of pasture for a short time, then moves it to another section.

"In the spring when things are growing quickly you want to move them no less than every three days so that they don't overgraze. ... We make these little paddocks with electric fence and keep the herd pretty tight together and move them frequently. That's good for a number of things: fly control, so we don't have to use chemicals to get rid of flies; and they're always eating a variety of pasture."

If the cows are allowed the run of the whole pasture, they will eat the plants they



Princess Beef founder and proprietor Cynthia Houseweart stands amid her herd at the Allen Ranch. Photos by Rita Clagett

being forced to eat stuff they don't like so much."

In the past, they've run both the mother cows and the beef steers together, but this year with the drought, they were forced to split the herd.

Last year Fruitland Mesa had just one month of water, she says, and she and the Allens had seen the writing on the wall and put out an SOS to the [Valley Organic Growers' Association](#). As a result, a family on Stewart Mesa offered their pasture for lease, looking to improve their land through animal impact.

Houseweart expresses deep concerns for the water resources of the valley. "It's huge. It's very scary. We all need to conserve a little more and spread it out a little better. It was very apparent in the drought this year. I mean, if there's no

water there is nothing. It goes back to a desert. So I think we all have to be careful."

Potential drilling in the valley, she says, is "frightening. Especially from an organic perspective. We are so careful about what we put on our land for our plants and soil health. It's very scary."

I ask about the B/B brand I see in Ira's metalwork on one of the corrals out the window. "I used the Allen brand when I first started Princess Beef, then when I got married we decided we should have our own brand," she answers. "My great-great-grandfather homesteaded in Holyoke, Colorado, and his original brand was available. Now all of our cows have the original Butterfield 1902 brand on their hips."

A perfect and poetic touch for this thriving family business.



Fifteen years later, descendants of the original Princess provide a family with income and a community with wholesome meat.

like the best first, and those plants will die out. "If they're forced to eat everything in a little place and then move on, they get a variety of things and then move on. They get high quality all the time. They're not just getting it in the beginning and then



Rita Clagett blogs about everything that makes the North Fork valley special at: www.northforkscrapbook.org

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