



Beef

West Slope woman finds calling with grass-finished beef operation

BY **NIKKI WORK**

princess



Cynthia Houseweart leans over to pet one of the cattle in the Princess Beef herd. She started the herd in the 90s when she worked on the Allen Ranch in Crawford, Colo. Now, she runs the grass-fed and finished beef business in Hotchkiss, Colo.

Photo by Nikki Work

For Cynthia Houseweart, a profitable beef business started with one cow. Her name was Princess.

When Houseweart was in college, the art history major never imagined she would find her calling on a Centennial farm in Hotchkiss, Colo. In fact, she wasn't sure what her path would be, so when her friend Amy Allen invited her to work as a ranch hand in Crawford after graduation, she agreed. She helped the Allen family drive cattle, and the industry stole her heart.

Houseweart worked on the Allen family's ranch for 12 years. After she was with the Allens for a few years, they gave her Princess — a black cow with a white face — and her calf as a gift. Whenever Houseweart went out to feed the cows on the Allen Ranch, Princess came up to her first — and Princess even let Houseweart pet her.

Now, Houseweart calls her the one that started it all.

Houseweart married her husband, Ira Houseweart, and the two moved onto his family's century-old farm where the couple and their daughters now operate Princess Beef, a grass-fed and finished beef company.

On the land behind the family's home, and in plots they still rotate on the Allen Ranch, the Housewearts raise their herd holistically on just pastureland or hay pulled off pasture, a



CeCe Houseweart snuggles her 4-H heifer. This summer, both CeCe and her older sister, Izzi, showed animals from the Princess Beef herd.

Photo courtesy of Cynthia Houseweart

technique that allows the family to sell their wares at a premium. Even with a volatile cattle market, grass-fed prices stay steady, Houseweart said, because it's an in-demand industry in which producers can set their own prices. Since there are far fewer ranchers growing grass-fed than grain-fed, consumers are willing to pay those prices.

Still, the Housewearts keep it fair. They're in cattle ranching out of passion for the animals and land, not to rake in profits, and raising animals from birth to slaughter takes more money

than sending a steer to be finished elsewhere, Houseweart said.

"You keep animals eating so much longer," she said. "Most people will wean at maybe six months and then sell those but we keep them a whole extra year. So it's a little more difficult to do."

Raising grass-finished animals was an ideal Houseweart decided matched up with her personal beliefs early-on. Though she understands the way cattle are traditionally raised, she knew it wasn't a good fit for her.

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She couldn't imagine putting her cattle into a feedlot.

"I just like the idea of having my animals stay on the ranch from birth all the way to slaughter," she said.

Houseweart did research into the potential health benefits of grass-raised beef, and knew that was the path she wanted for her herd. Some research points to more Omega 3's and more beta carotene in grass-fed beef, as well as several other benefits, she said.

"It just felt like the right thing to do, so that's how I started," she said.

The Housewearts strongly believe the way they raise their herd helps the land. The cattle graze on the hay fields, and the combination of the manure they leave behind and the organic matter they trample into the

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ground makes for rich soil to grow even better pastures.

These ideals go back to her time on the Allen Ranch. Steve and Rachel Allen sent Houseweart to several holistic management classes and helped mentor her as she learned more about alternative styles of ranching.

Princess Beef is also certified Animal Welfare Approved. That

means every year, the ranch is audited and the treatment of cattle, soil quality, grazing techniques and more are evaluated.

"The people that buy my beef appreciate the humane aspect," Houseweart said.

The 16 mother cows and the 40 market cattle that lazily graze just behind the Housewearts' home are like furry family members for Houseweart, her husband and their two daughters, Izzi and CeCe. The girls show cattle in 4-H, and spend countless hours halter-training and grooming them. When any family members walk out into the pasture, instead of skittering away like most cattle would, the Princess Beef herd plods up curiously — just like Princess did once upon a time.

Watching her girls grow up around the animals that gave her purpose is fulfilling for Houseweart, she said. Her children love the cattle, and the animals — including the horses, mule and herding dogs — love them, too.

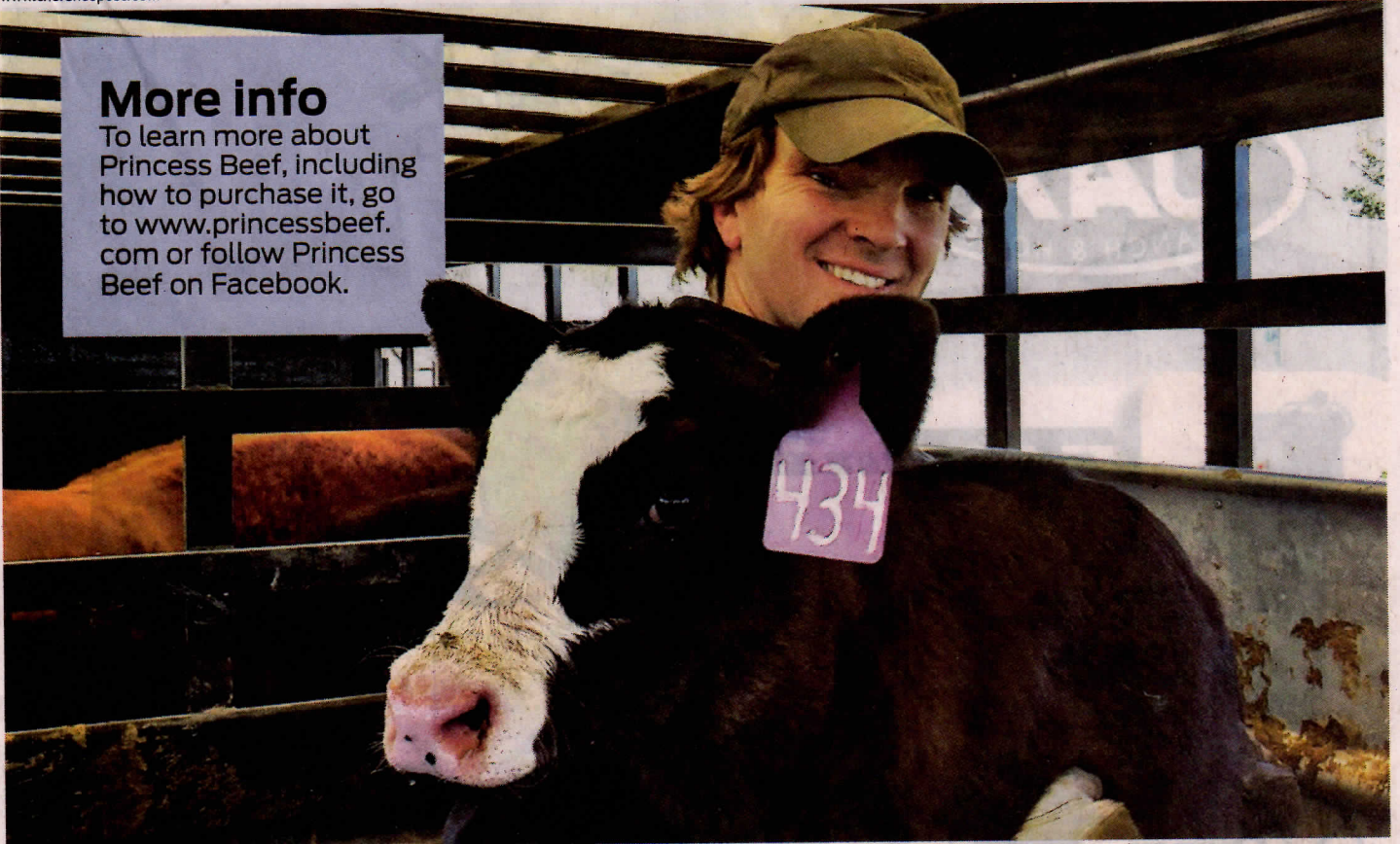


Cynthia Houseweart chose to raise her cattle as a grass-fed and finished herd in part because she couldn't imagine sending them to a feedlot.

Photo by Nikki Work

More info

To learn more about Princess Beef, including how to purchase it, go to www.princessbeef.com or follow Princess Beef on Facebook.



Ira Houseweart holds up Little Princess in 2015. Little Princess is the great-great-granddaughter of the late Princess — the first cow in the Princess Beef herd, and Cynthia Houseweart said she looks just like her.

Photo courtesy of Cynthia Houseweart

“Not only do we feel good about the product we’re selling, we also get to include the whole family,” she said, smiling.

Even though Princess died a few years ago, Houseweart still thinks about her. That first cow was special, she said. Whenever there’s a black-and-white faced heifer in the herd, it tugs on her heartstrings.

All of Princess’ progeny had regal names, too, like Duchess. One of Princess’ great-granddaughters — a black cow with a smattering of white markings on her forehead — was named Princess Leia after the famous “Star Wars” heroine. Last year, Princess Leia had a calf, a black heifer with an all-white face. Houseweart said she looked just like her great-great-grandmother.

She named her Little Princess, after the cow that started it all. ♦



Some research points to several health benefits of grass-fed beef, like higher levels of Omega 3’s and beta carotene.

Photo by Nikki Work