

Caldwell Farms

The leaves are already changing color on this sun dappled September afternoon, and the smell of fresh cut hay is in the air, as Ralph Caldwell and his daughter Deed break to talk with me, one of their regular organic beef customers at the Camden Farmers Market. They are racing to finish the important chores of fall on their full-frontal press toward the date when their hired staff will break for the October 30th beginning of deer hunting season.

The chore list this September is long. Beside the ongoing tasks of feeding and caring for their herds, and milking their dairy cows, they are chopping their third crop of hay, building a new dry cow barn, seeding the winter grains of wheat and rye and putting cover crops such as kale and winter wheat on open land to prevent erosion.

Ralph, his wife Sandra and their two daughters, the 3rd and 4th generation of the Caldwell family to farm, are raising beef the natural way for the same reason that so many other family farms are changing what they raise and how they sell. The growing demand for natural and organic products gives them an opportunity to improve the quality of animal life, reduce their hours, increase their income and assure that the farm passes profitably to the fourth generation.

The Caldwell Family Farm was established in 1944 by Lawrence and Hilda Caldwell and their boys Lawrence Jr. and Ralph, as small children. The farm was MOFGA (Maine Organic Farmers and Gardners Association) certified for organic milk production in the spring of 1999 and certified for organic beef production in 2000.

Adding the organic and natural beef business was a compatible supplement to their milk production. It also provided a good way to increase family involvement and make better use of the transition feed they were growing. And this all took place before the first outcry about Mad Cow Disease in U.S. raised cattle provided even increased market demand.

Moving toward organic required changing what they feed their cattle to one hundred percent organic product. Some of the feed, the forages—hay, grass and corn--are all their own, grown on the fields that spread from their large white farm

house close to the road. The Caldwells go as far as Delaware, Prince Edwards and the Finger Lakes for the concentrates, the organic feed--cornmeal, roasted soy beans, barley—which complement the roughage provided by the hay and grass.

The base of their herd, which they are building toward 175 to 200 head, are Short Horn females bred with Angus males. They breed most of the cattle right on the farm and buy additional as calves. The move to organic from natural is gradual, driven by how quickly they can change and certify their feed. By the end of 2005 about 60% of their product will be organic, the rest natural (organic meat must receive only organic feed, which means no chemical pesticides, etc., and be free of all antibiotics and hormones).

Milking animals can be transitioned in one year to organic, but it takes three years to transition the land. That's where the natural beef comes in. They have purposely reduced their dairy herd from about 225 milkers to 150 today, while building the beef herds. With their organic dairy cows, they have reduced their milking to twice a day from three times, a function of feeding less grain, but also made the product they have more profitable.

The Caldwell's move to organic beef production was an instinctive response to the changing market, but fueled by extensive study in journals and trade publications. Both the University of Maine and MOFGA have been tremendous supporters and helpers. While Caldwell Beef is not the first organic beef producer in Maine, it is one of only three and already after just these few years by far the largest, producing more than the other farms combined.

Maine already has the highest percentage of organic dairy farms in the country, with 16% of its dairy farms certified. And organic milk sales are increasing between 25 and 30% over the prior year's base. The move to organic beef is slower and more costly, but the Caldwell's are already finding that the demand far exceeds supply.

Deed Caldwell is the one on the road, taking her truck to the Camden Market and upscale restaurants, natural food stores and coops from Blue Hill down to Scarborough. Their organic prime rib is used by Fore Street, the Portland restaurant that received this year's James Beard Foundation

award as best restaurant in the Northeast.

The Caldwell's have a tremendous sense of satisfaction in their ability to provide a quality product and develop relationships with their customers. Some of the summer folk have even begun to have Deed ship to them when they leave Maine after the season. And they have been able to get the whole family involved, including the four children in the fourth generation. The remaining challenge is to get those who live in rural Maine—not just the upscale foodies on the Coast—to understand the value of organic and natural beef enough to pay the difference.

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