



## Belties: More than Black-and-White Attractions

Bred as beef cattle for centuries, Belted Galloways are finding new popularity with beef-loving consumers.

by Mary Shepherd

**B**elted Galloway cattle are descendants of the hearty cattle that developed during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century in the ancient Galloway district of Scotland. Survival on such a cold, rugged and rain-swept region would have required these solid-colored, shaggy-coated and predominantly black Galloway cattle to evolve with the robust traits exhibited by today's Belted Galloways

Other attributes of the "Belties" include a calm temperament, good mothering qualities, easy birthing, robust health and long lives, but is their physical appearance that distinguishes them most from other cattle breeds – at least as far as the public is concerned. The most visible traits of the belties – polled (hornless), black and belted – are dominant and are passed on to their progeny.

However, A.H. Chatfield, Jr. (1900-1999), whose Aldermere Farm in Rockport, Maine, bred Belted Galloways continuously for almost fifty years, said the most important Galloway trait is that they were bred from their beginning of their origin for beef production under range conditions.

### Becoming a cattleman

Jon Bednarski got into the Belted Galloway beef business by happenstance. Although he was familiar with Belties, his Vermont background had been spent working summers on his uncle's dairy farm. He later built a career in the log & timber housing industry and land development, but he never planned to be in the cattle business.

His entry into agriculture came about when his daughter Kristin was competing in horse shows, which led from owning a saddle, to owning a horse, to buying a five-acre place near La Grange, Ky., for the horse.

Belted Galloways came back into Bednarski's life seven years ago as a Father's Day gift from his wife Sylvia. She remembered how fondly he had talked about Belted Galloways, so she surprised him with three Belties.

Time passed and changes happened. Kristin went from showing horses to writing about them in the equine journalism program at the University of Kentucky. Those five acres grew into 50. The three Belties increased into an average herd size of 40-50, including 15 brood cows.

Bednarski became a cattleman.

### Learning by doing




After deciding that farming could be a viable option, Bednarski went through a number of classes offered by the University of Kentucky Extension Service. He attended the 11-month Master Cattlemen's Program, Advanced Master Cattlemen classes and Master Grazer's classes, with an initial goal of selling breeding stock.

He praises the variety and number of programs and the continuing support of the Extension Service. "I had no preconceived notions about cattle ranching or conservation, so I have participated in just about every Extension program offered," he said. "I'm definitely a start-up farmer and had a lot to learn, and they had the expertise.


"Our county agents are phenomenal."

He also stresses the importance of learning from others in the business. With more than 1.1 million head of cattle and 40,000 producers, Kentucky ranks fifth in the number

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of beef-cattle producing farms in the nation and has 93 area chapters of the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association. Bednarski said the 50-member Oldham County chapter provides members with a network to help each other, share information and jointly have a voice in the community.

### Getting into the meat business

Bednarski was also looking for options that could help make his operation sustainable, and four years ago he chose beef sales as that option. The Kentucky Department of Agriculture and the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association developed a program for beef marketing and offered matching funds for operations participating in "Kentucky Proud," the state's promotion to buy local.

"The timing was perfect to expand, so, at age 50, I jumped into the meat business," he said.

He called on Dan Weintraub, a 20-year business partner in their Sherwood Corporation, a land development and preservation company, to help plan a sales and marketing strategy for the new diversification business, Sherwood Acres Beef. Knowing that a marketing curve takes from product introduction to buying to repeat buying, the men wanted promotional materials that didn't look like Sherwood Acres Beef was a new business.

"We wanted to create an image that looked as if the business had been going for a number of years," Bednarski said.

Their plan of action was to use a variety of public relations and advertising techniques that would make the public aware of Sherwood Acres Beef by showing what the company had to sell, how it was produced and why people should buy it. Included in the mix were a website with Internet sales, a four-color brochure, business cards, pop-up displays and banners for the farmers markets and other promotion materials.

Inclusion in the Kentucky Proud promotion, which included in-store freezer placements and co-op advertising, helped spread the Sherwood Acres Beef brand throughout the state and to out-of-state customers who could order by phone or computer. Today, all of those orders are filled weekly on Mondays and Tuesdays and shipped by Fedx for second-day delivery.

In addition, a good part of the business's sales growth



Individual cuts of Sherwood Acres Beef are vacuum sealed and labeled for consumer sales.



Carla Crush oversees the retail operation of "The World's Smallest Beef Shoppe."

has been face-to-face contact, particularly when selling fresh meat cuts to Louisville's restaurants and working out freezer space arrangements with the area's food markets. "It's a matter of knocking on doors and emphasizing local," Bednarski said. The business's delivery car – a black Toyota Scion customized with a wide white belt – increases visibility of the Beltie meat business.

For direct-to-consumer sales, Sherwood Acres Beef participates in three area farmers markets a week during the season because "farmers markets have been a great avenue for us." All meat is sold by individual cuts, so customers don't have to buy quarters or halves like some beef producers require.

He also welcomes people to visit the farm. "Today's consumers are concerned about the safety of their food, so they want to know where it comes from," he said.

Some of that on-farm visitation is a result of Farm Bureau's Roadside Farm Market Program, which includes endorsement through listings in the organization's publications, links on its website and roadside signage at the farm. Bednarski said the \$300 membership fee has more than paid for itself by the sales brought in by those references.

The newest project for Sherwood Acres Beef is what Bednarski calls "The World's Smallest Beef Shoppe." This self-service store contains a cash register, two glass-topped freezers that hold a variety of frozen vacuum-packed beef cuts and posters on the wall that inform customers about caloric and nutritional value of Beltie meat. The store is a destination for customers who miss the farmers market, and it attracts new passing-by customers.

He is also exploring other direct sales methods to consumers. One example under consideration is a CSA meat-only box or a combination box that could be filled with such year-round available items as eggs, dairy products, baked goods, honey, hydroponic produce and aqua-agriculture fish.

### Raising the beef

The classes Bednarski attended on raising beef, marketing beef and conservation methods have enabled him to incorporate the classroom and laboratory lessons into his farming operation. He said one of the most important

things he learned was “you have to be a forage farmer before you can be a beef farmer,” so he recently purchased an additional 100 acres to expand the forage quality.

Bednarski practices good herd management needed to keep his cattle healthy. In addition to in pastures that have plenty of fresh water and shade, he provides head rubs and street sweeper brushes for the Belties thick coats. Feeding pads prevent the cattle from standing in mud while they eat the 10 percent conventional grain feed that supplements the 90 percent grass diet they eat in the field.

Bednarski says the taste of grass-fed beef comes from what they eat, and the grain adds a small amount of marbling that adds depth to the flavor. As for tenderness, the age of the steer is the major factor, according to Bednarski. He said the optimum age for tenderness is 20 to 24 months, which he coordinates for their retail buyers, stores and restaurants.

Bednarski’s beef is free of growth stimulants and sub-therapeutic antibiotics. His objective is to naturally raise hormone-free, steroid-free beef cattle without the high stress of high volume production or feedlots. He cites studies showing that meat from the Belted Galloway has lower total fat, lower saturated fat, higher Omega 3 acids, a lower Omega 6 to Omega 3 ratio and about 40 percent less cholesterol than typical store-bought beef.

On the hoof, the steers weigh 1,100 to 1,300 pounds that dress out to 450 to 550 pounds of actual meat. The beef is USDA inspected and properly aged for tenderness before being vacuum packed and frozen. Sherwood Acres sells no bone-in meat to prevent any punctures that could negate the integrity of the vacuum seal.

### Belties for small farmers?

As for the Belted Galloways, Bednarski believes the breed is perfect for the small farmer for a number of reasons: food efficiency, good weight gain per acre and temperament. In addition, the cattle can live in just about any climate as long as they have fresh water and shade. With 4,000 hairs per square inch, their coats keep ice and snow from reaching the skin and are too thick for biting flies to penetrate.

He advises farmers interested in raising Belted Galloway or any breed of beef cattle to learn all they can about the breed. Talking with farmers in the business, asking them questions and visiting their farms can provide face-to-face information. Associations, whether general or dedicated to the breed, can provide networking opportunities.



Using a black car with a white “Beltie” stripe for meat deliveries was a marketing idea of Jon Bednarski, left, and Dan Weintraub.



Jon Bednarski enjoys telling the Belted Galloway meat story face-to-face with farmers market customers.

For other start-up farmers like himself, however, Bednarski especially recommends attending classes offered by the state’s Extension Service before making any decisions.

“There are many programs out there to help small farmers,” he said.

[SherwoodAcresBeef.com](http://SherwoodAcresBeef.com)

[Beltie.org](http://Beltie.org)

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FMT Editor: 800-959-3276, ext. 8; [mshepherd@farmersmarketstoday.com](mailto:mshepherd@farmersmarketstoday.com)  
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