Claybrook Farms is a 200-cow Angus seedstock operation near Covington in Tipton County, Tennessee. The farm, started by Carl Turner in 1964, is now operated by Carl’s son, Dave Turner. In 2010, Dave was feeding and selling cattle not sold as seedstock to another local farmer, who was direct marketing meat to restaurants and consumers. Dave had 30 calves on feed for the farm when one of the other farm’s owners passed away suddenly and the meat marketing business closed. The market for his fed cattle was gone. Dave and his cousin, Michael Rice, discussed the possibility of going into the meat marketing business themselves, and the concept for Claybrook Farms Meat Company was born.

Dave hired Michael to begin developing a market for Claybrook Farms beef and recruited friend Randy Lock to think through business organization and logistics. Michael began calling on Memphis restaurants and making plans to sell at the downtown Memphis Farmers Market.
Developing the Market

Dave Turner was no stranger to restaurants, as he operated a steakhouse for seven years. That experience gave Claybrook a unique advantage in understanding and accessing the restaurant market. Dave and Michael specifically selected 3-, 4- and 5-star restaurants run by chefs to target for their product. “Our price point is going to be higher than commodity beef,” said Michael. “So I knew [those] restaurants were going to be the places interested in what I had to offer.” He advises producers to approach chefs with total honesty and transparency about their farm’s production practices – and plenty of samples. “I wasn’t pushy,” he said. “A couple samples and chefs were ready to start chatting.”

According to Michael, focusing only on wholesale sales to restaurants would not make the operation profitable. “If we just focus on wholesale, we’re only just paying the bills,” said Michael. Restaurant sales will help cover expenses and build recognition with individual consumers in what Michael and Dave see as the more profitable retail market.

To develop the restaurant market, it is important to build a rapport with chefs. Chefs will often include the farm’s name on their menus and in advertising specials. “People see our name on a high-quality product they like in the restaurant, and that’s kind of pushed us into the retail market,” said Michael Rice.

Building the Brand

Consistent product quality is vital to building a brand. Claybrook Farms accomplishes that by using uniform cattle genetics, collecting ultrasound data on the cattle and using a single processing facility. All the beef sold by the meat company is Claybrook Farms genetics. Dave said, “It’s the traceability of the genetics and all the ultrasound work and data collected that tells us what kind of marbling and quality our beef will have.”

Michael keeps detailed records of every cut sold. “I keep a spreadsheet with feedback (from the chefs) on a per-animal basis,” said Michael. Michael also records feedback from their retail customers. “If you talk to the person who ate it, that’s the best...
feedback you can get,” he said. With that data, Dave can analyze information about the animal’s genetics, the ribeye ultrasound and any comments from chefs. That helps link farm decisions with the growing meat company market.

Michael Rice said the farm’s extensive genetics and performance data allow him to know exactly what kind of beef he can offer chefs and other customers. “The genetics help us talk about what cattle are coming at what time, what I should expect in terms of quality,” he said. “I think that helps separate our product.”

The Claybrook Farms Meat Company brand has benefited from chef and consumer interest in local food. Using farm estate brands was one of the hottest trends among chefs in 2013, according to the National Restaurant Association, and consumers continue to show interest in local food.

Where They Are Today
In 2013, the meat company’s gross sales were 60 to 70 percent wholesale – supplying about 30 restaurants, hotels and hospitals – and 30 to 40 percent retail. The company retailed beef at the Memphis Farmers Market (downtown) and by direct delivery to Memphis consumers.

Dave feeds 70 percent of the cattle sold as Claybrook Farms Beef, and two area farms feed the rest. All cattle are kept on grass but supplemented at the feed bunk with the farm’s own haylage and grain, as well as some distiller’s grains.

By late 2013, Claybrook was processing four cattle per week with a market ready for more. “Michael would love to be at five, but I just don’t have the cattle right now,” said Dave. As more of the farm’s calves are ready for feeding, Dave plans to add some more feeding areas at the edge of pasture and continue having other farms finish some of the cattle harvested for the meat company.

Planning for the Future
Claybrook Farms Meat Company was awarded a USDA Value Added Producer Grant in 2013. “This is going to allow us to grow the business without having borrowed capital,” said Randy, who spearheaded the meat company’s

“it’s the traceability of the genetics and all the ultrasound work and data collected that tells us what kind of marbling and quality our beef will have.”
150-page grant application. The grant is allowing the farm to increase product volume by purchasing more cattle with Claybrook genetics from partner farms. The grant is also enabling them to increase advertising.

The Claybrook team will take a hard look at adding new value-added products such as jerky and all-beef hot dogs to their product line in the future. The farm may also eventually add other proteins, like pork and pastured poultry, to its brand. “Customers are looking for more selection,” said Dave.

They view the farm’s potential retail market as the Mid-South/Delta area – Memphis, northeast Arkansas, Missouri’s bootheel and northern Mississippi. Dave, Randy and Michael are sure the market is there. “People buying our beef know who fed, grew and took care of that cow until it got to their table. And they’re looking for that connection,” said Randy. Michael Rice said his transparent marketing message will not change, no matter how many cattle the company can sell. “I introduce them to our family’s product, and I invite the chefs out to the farm to see what we’re doing,” he said, “and once they try the product, they’re almost always coming back for more.”

Learn more about the Tennessee Value-Added Beef Program and the Center for Profitable Agriculture online at https://ag.tennessee.edu/cpa or by calling (931) 486-2777.