

By hand, a better brand?

In an industry dominated by factory farms, a few ranchers still raise their beef the old fashioned way. Fans say the superior flavor is well worth the trouble.

[Johnathan L. Wright](#) RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL
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Three ranch hands grab onto a calf held tight by Tom Chenoweth during branding at the Murry Ranch near Doyle, Calif., on April 17. [Marilyn Newton](#)/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

You notice the smoke first, as it drifts from the grill on which a row of ground beef patties are cooking. The smoke smells cleaner than hamburger smoke usually does, brighter, somehow, without a trace of greasy damp. The smell lingers a few seconds, and then the wind swats the smoke toward the Diamond Mountains, which line the hamlet of Doyle, Calif., about 45 miles northwest of Reno.

You notice the taste second. The hamburger patties — thinner at the edges, chubbier in the middle — taste of smoke and lean and grass and grain and sky and, almost imperceptibly, of something sweet. Condiments almost constitute sacrilege here, and buns seem beside the point.

“How is the meat?” asked Jason Murry, the owner of Murry’s Small Family Ranch, which lies just outside Doyle, beneath the shoulders of the Diamond range.

Murry’s tone mixed pride and hope with concern, and not least because he asked the question of a visiting rancher. Murry raised the calves that provided the beef for the burgers, and with every bite that someone takes, whether a rancher, customer or family member, Murry’s reputation comes into play. And so, for that matter, does his philosophy of ranching, which he said is distinguished by one tenet: “The well-being of the animal is No. 1.”

All for flavor

Murry will raise about 160 calves this year. He feeds them alfalfa, grass hay and a mix of grains like corn, oats and barley. He also feeds them barley and wheat mash leftover from the brewing process at Brew Brothers. The mash receives a pour of molasses, which gives Murry’s ground beef that delicate, haunting sweetness. In summer, the calves and their mothers graze on grass, bitter brush and willow trees in the high country of the Diamond Mountains. In fall and early winter, before final fattening begins, they feed on grass in two Reno-area pastures. Murry said he never gives his calves steroids or growth hormones or feed made from animal by-products.



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Jason Murry, owner of the Murry Ranch.

Murry's customers said such practices were one reason they bought his beef.

"I like that there are no hormones," said Debbie Carey of Sparks. "I pay attention to that. I've eaten a lot of beef over the years, and I like to know what's in it. I know what I'm tasting, and we love this beef. That's true from the hamburger to the steaks to the roasts."

Murry's calves aren't stuffed into pens. They feed in 10-acre lots, and they don't mingle with cattle from other herds. This separation reduces the chance of spreading infection or disease. When it's branding day, only Murry brands the hides of the calves, and when he's done with each calf, he pats its side and wipes hair and dirt from its newly branded left shoulder. These gestures seem almost tender amid dust stirred up by hooves and smoke from the branding iron and the sound of calves calling for their mothers. But then again, Murry knows these calves, he knows their mothers, and with fatherly pride, he admires their glossy flanks as they move about the ranch. Some calves even have personalities, Murry said.

Murry's approach — you could almost call it hand-rearing — leads to happy calves, he said, and happy calves produce lean, flavorful meat. Such pronouncements, it turns out, aren't just promotional brio.

"A majority of the stuff on our counter comes out of family ranches," said Clint Jolly, whose family owns Butcher Boy Meat & Deli in Sparks, the longtime purveyors of fine meats to Northern Nevada. "Smaller ranches tend to pay a lot more attention to customers' and animals' satisfaction. When they're crowded together, the cows aren't as happy, and adrenaline pumps through their body. Adrenaline tends to make the meat more gamy, a bitter kind of flavor."

Cows fed only on grass, Jolly continued, often yield meat that tastes like "grass clippings." Adding grain to the feed lot mix, as Murry does, helps the calves develop intermuscular fat, which improves flavor.

And flavor, of course, is what attracts customers.

"I've been eating beef forever, and there's not even a comparison anymore with what you buy out of the store," said Russ Martinez of Reno. "His filet, the juiciness, you could cut it with a fork. The hamburger, even people who have no clue about meat notice the difference in the flavor. This is not assembly line beef."



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Cattle eat a mixture of oats, corn and molasses twice a day at the Murry Ranch north of Doyle, Calif

Corral action

It was branding day a few weeks ago at Murry's spread. Neighboring ranchers, and ranchers from across Northern California, came to help. As is the custom, they worked only for a sumptuous ranch barbecue that Murry's wife, Gailene, would set out in the early afternoon. No money changed hands.

"When you do your branding, it's work. When you help out the neighbors, it's fun," said Chet Porterfield, who ranches his family's land in Macdoel, Calif., near the Oregon border.

"These are real cowboys," Murry added. "This is their way of life. They can show off their roping skills."

Which they did, men and women both, threading their way on horseback through a corral filled with calves, and with mamas there to keep the calves calm. A lean of the torso, a few flicks of the wrist and the cowboys lassoed the rear legs of the calves, a process known as “heeling.”

Thus immobilized, the calves could be branded. Murry marked their left shoulders — the only method, by the way, to prove legal ownership — and his neighbor, Cori O'Brien, inoculated the calves against bovine infections using a device that looked like a ray gun.

Everyone helped on branding day. Kady Porterfield, 11, Chet Porterfield's daughter, sat on a fence post and called out whether a calf about to be branded was a heifer (a female calf) or a steer (a castrated male calf). An ID tag in the right ear meant female, in the left ear meant male. Danielle O'Hare, the daughter of ranch manager Dan O'Hare, kept track of how many calves had been branded and inoculated by making tick marks in a small notepad.

Just beyond the corral, a pair of white Akbash dogs sat in their run. Akbash are traditional Turkish herding dogs, and Murry brought them to the ranch to protect the calves from mountain lions and other predators.

“A good dog will take the place of three cowboys,” Murry said. “They are raised with the calves. They naturally bond with the calves. They're nocturnal. If there's a sick calf, they'll go lie with it to protect it. They'll take on two or three coyotes.”

Protecting the calves, Murry said, went hand in hand with feeding and housing them properly. When calves feel safe, they don't produce the stress-related hormones (like adrenaline) that toughen meat and harm its flavor.

Only when ready

During a break from branding, Dan O'Hare, the ranch manager and a lifelong rancher, fed buckets of mash and grains to steer gathered in one feed lot.

“Come on, baby dolls,” he called to them.

These beefy babes were really working on their intermuscular marbling, so their diet was mostly grain. Some steer held back, appearing to wait their turn at the trough, but others shouldered ahead, with cow 705 leading the way. Seven-oh-five, in fact, wouldn't take his nose from the molasses mash.

“He's a greedy rascal,” O'Hare said.

O'Hare feeds the steer several times a day by hand, and so he “gets to know them individually.” At large operations, pens of cattle head to processing en masse. But because Murry's ranch is small, O'Hare can do things differently. As the calves approach processing age and weight, generally about 14 months and 1,000 pounds, O'Hare assesses each calf for finish, a “know-it-when-I-see it” agglomeration of factors such as girth, fat cover, roundness of rump, the existence of a shoulder groove and a visible fat wrinkle at the base of the tail.

“These are things I observe separately on each cattle,” O'Hare said. “Some go to market lighter than others. There's no pre-set weight. It's when the finish is right, whatever the size. I will not ship a calf until he's ready to go.”

Work, always

The folks gathered at Murry's Small Family Ranch don't spin romantic tales about the disappearing West or the dying ranch hand gazing across the range at sunset. Such confections are the province of movies and popular fiction and weekend cowboys from Seattle and Cincinnati. Ranching is simply their life, what they do, and before anything else, it is deeply, punishingly, profoundly hard work. Sunsets aren't a backdrop; they're the time when work still calls.

At the barbecue, a spread big enough to ease sore backs and tired hands for a moment — steaks and cornbread and rolls and salads and pies and brownies and ice cream and stunningly rich baked beans from rancher Merritt Moore — accompanied Murry's wondrous hamburgers. Folks chowed appreciatively, but didn't linger. The wind was picking up from the north, the afternoon lay closer to finish than start, and there was still a corral of calves to brand.