

# “a marketing dream”

SPECKLE PARK SPARKLES IN DIRECT SALES



*Written by Jeff Gaye*

**T**wo family ranching operations in two different parts of the country; two approaches to raising and marketing their beef; two different customer bases.

But one beef breed: Speckle Park.

At least as far as their direct marketing goes, that is—both the Onward Ranch in BC and Codiak Acres in Alberta raise Angus cattle as well. But when they are shipping direct to customers or selling from the farm gate, it’s their Speckle Park beef that stands out and brings customers back for more.

Gary and Nancy Kiziak own Codiak Acres near Ardrossan, Alberta. Their operation deals in purebred genetics for export, bull and heifer sales, commercial cattle, and “Meat Me At Codiak,” their direct-to-consumer shop.

Codiak has been raising Speckle Park cattle for 32 years, and Gary was instrumental in giving the breed its foothold in Australia. He and Nancy know the breed well, and they know what their

customers like: tender, marbled, flavourful beef.

Nancy runs the meat shop on the farm. She says they will sell 40 to 45 animals per year through the shop.

“I think it was about 40 animals last year,” Nancy said. “Which I think is pretty decent for a small business.

“Our advertising is just basically through social media, Facebook and Instagram,” she said. “We’re working on doing up a website for Meat Me at Codiak with a link to Codiak Acres. And we have a girl we’ve hired to do our social media stuff, so it’s not us—it’s professionally done.”

The Codiak Acres cattle are raised on pasture and finished on barley. This gives the beef its desirable marbling and the flavour the Kiziaks and their customers like.

Onward Ranch, on the other hand, chooses to raise and finish their Speckle Park herd on grass. Ty and Ingrid Johnston, who



own and operate Onward, say the grass fed and finished approach suits the ranch's terrain and gives them the product their customers prefer.

Part of it is about playing to their strengths: to feed with grain, they would have to have it shipped in from the prairies or from the US. But their ranch has plenty of grass.

"For someone in British Columbia it really makes sense to grass-finish because that's what we have here," Ingrid said. "We're valleys and mountains and river bottoms and lakes. All those things are on our ranch. We don't have grain fields, we're not growing wheat and barley on our farm."

She says the techniques of raising and finishing beef on grass have developed and improved, and she and Ty are proud of the meat they produce.

"Growing up," Ty said, "you'd see these grass-fed cows, and they were the older cows and things like that that would end up in a rancher's freezer. So you'd be like, 'oh man, grass fed.' But now that we're doing it right, it's just like night and day."

The Johnstons run about 600 Angus and 100 Speckle Park. Most of the cattle are sold into the main market, but five to ten per cent—all Speckle Park—are selected for their direct sales enterprise.

Like the Kiziaks, they see Speckle Park cattle as a perfect breed for direct sales.

"The main markets are looking for 'big is best' and

'the bigger the steak the better.' But with us, we always see grass as our strength on our ranch. So we really push that it's grass fed, grass finished," Ty said.

"It takes longer. But the Speckle Park breed is fitting that profile ideally: the size of the animal, the size of the steaks, the marbling, there's a lot of tenderness. And we're really proud of our product."

That attention to quality is important for both operations and their direct sales. Unlike with supermarket or restaurant beef which typically doesn't carry a brand name, consumers know which farm they buy from. And a happy customer will come back.

"We cow-calf as part of our purebred operation," Gary Kiziak says. "And then we look at our corrals and if we like it really good, we keep it as a genetic animal. If we don't, then we pasture them. Everything we have is pastured 24 months before we finish them."

From there, a handful of animals at a time may be selected for Meat Me At Codiak. The Kiziaks have a couple of abattoirs they work with regularly—with demand for hook space outpacing availability, Gary says it's important to have a good relationship with the abattoir.

Nancy agrees. "We've got two animals booked in with each abattoir per month, we just do a standing order of two per month," she said. "If we sell them or if they're pre-sold, then we'll take them in. And if they're not, we can give up those spots. But at least we have them."

And as for repeat business, Gary says "some people are buying their eighth and ninth and tenth animals from us since we started to get into this."

The Johnstons also hand-select animals for their direct sales, and they too rely on a small butcher



The Johnston Family of Onward Ranch

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The Kiziak Family of Codiak Acres



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to give them the product they want. In their case this is not only grass-fed, but dry-aged.

This, Ingrid says, is “really important. Just the quality of what they’re getting makes people come back.”

Ty says they have never heard from a dissatisfied customer. The problem for them hasn’t been making customers happy, it’s finding them in the first place.

“The difficult part is actually just reaching people. That’s because we’re ranchers first, and this direct marketing came later.”

The Johnstons ship frozen beef to their customers, packed in insulated boxes chilled with dry ice. An interruption to their delivery network gave them an opportunity to see who their remote buyers were.

To hear Ingrid tell it, she was pleasantly surprised.

“We had an interesting thing happen a couple of years ago in B.C. when we had those big storm systems that moved in. Highway 1 was shut down, the Coquihalla was shut down. We decided to collect all of our orders for Christmas and drive down and hand deliver them,” she said.

“We spent a couple of days in the Lower Mainland doing that, and to meet our customers at their doors and hand them their package was actually a great honour. But one thing we realized is they were all ages; and there were single people, there were couples, there were big families, and they were from all different economic backgrounds.

“And along those lines, I found it so encouraging just how big the market is, because I know that some of the direct marketers view everybody else as competition.” But as they drove around, “bombing down every back road,” she said, they got a sense of how much opportunity is out there.

“The market is so big, and I believe the public just needs to appreciate the higher quality. And to know your farmer, know your rancher behind the scenes,” Ingrid

said. “It’s so valuable.”

Codiak Acres, meanwhile, is located in sprawling Strathcona County not far from Edmonton. They have experienced the same benefit from meeting their customers, although in most cases the customer comes to them.

“We’ve been very blessed that there’s a couple of farm tours that the county puts up,” Gary said. “You get a multitude of people on a couple of different days in summer that come in and Nancy and her girls put out some samples and we cook them there.”

“One is through 360 Alberta and the other is Alberta Open Farm Days,” Nancy said. “Gary will do a spiel and show people the cattle and stuff. And then we do some samples of meat. I call in a crew and they come and help sell and promote and feed people and all that kind of stuff. We do that at both of them.”

At one event they sold \$3,200 worth of beef and beef products. “We were digging in our own freezer for meat to sell,” Nancy remembers.

Those are the occasions where the beef speaks for itself.

“Someone asked me recently how [Speckle Park] would compare to Angus, and I said, ‘I can’t tell you that,’” Nancy said. “I don’t like to judge Angus. I said you’ll have to try it to find out, and then you tell me.”

But, she said, “I don’t know when the last time was that I had a piece of Angus beef.”

It’s a changing and at times volatile world for selling beef. Consumer demands are constantly evolving, and many people are looking for different, better beef products than what they’ve been used to buying. Others have environmental or health concerns.

Disruptions in feeding and packing during the Covid pandemic also showed how fragile the supply chain can be—and it’s often the producers who wind up with the short end of the stick.

Direct sales are an opportunity for producers to get the best price for beef, and for consumers to find the beef they want. And the Kiziaks and the Johnstons have found Speckle Park cattle to be a difference-maker.

**“They are a marketing dream,” Ty Johnston said. “Just their markings are so striking alone, but that’s just a small component of it. Basically, the breed is tailor made for what we do: grass fed, grass finished, smaller frame, beautiful product, easy to finish. They fit perfectly into what we’re doing and a consistent product as well. So yeah, the Speckle Park has really, really helped us.”**

This is key to the success of the breed. As Gary Kiziak explained, the numbers aren’t there for Speckle Park to be handled and marketed on a scale comparable to Angus, for instance.

It’s harder for feedlots to buy Speckle Park cattle because they’re looking to fill a pen with a hundred animals they can feed in a specific way. And while Gary has had some small restaurants looking to buy, they want a steady supply of very specific cuts. Again, it’s hard to guarantee the supply.

But when Nancy was asked if Speckle Park beef was driving the success of their direct sales, she replied with one word:

**“Absolutely.”**

