

# SPECKLED FATE & FAT STEERS

Meat Quality and Efficiencies of Production on Peace Vale Farm

*Written by Catherine Brown*



**“It was the Speckle Park steers that made the difference,”**

**P**am and Aaron Tjepkema of Peace Vale Farm and Meat Shop in Fort St John, British Columbia, discovered the merits of Speckle Park cattle quite by fortunate chance. Their on-farm meat shop slowly but surely developed a beef clientele until one year, they had more customers than fat steers available. At the auction barn at Dawson Creek they sought out 10 of the most affordable quality steers available, which happened to be Speckle Park steers.

“My beef clients have always been honest with me,” says Pam “but when I sold the meat from those Speckle Park steers, someone reached out to me to say that even though they have always had a good experience with their beef, they wanted to know why the most recent beef purchased was extra good.”

“It was the Speckle Park steers that made the difference,” says Pam.

She and her husband Aaron are sold on the meat quality of the breed and are also sold on their efficient Speckle Park cows. Some customers are specifically requesting Speckle Park beef.

The reason they got a good price for those auction mart steers, says Pam, is the prejudice that some buyers have with non-conventional looking cattle. Since that fateful original purchase, they have experienced the same prejudice against their own Speckle Park influence cattle in the auction ring. The black hided calves normally fetch a premium over their speckled calves.

Those “Speckles” are nevertheless the foundation of the Tjepkemas’ herd and growing business.

Pam grew up on the Fort St John-area farm that would eventually become the location of her immediate family’s current home and family business. Her Swiss grandparents established a dairy operation there in 1952, having immigrated to Canada earlier. Her mom and dad, Esther and Chris Haab carried on that dairy, along with a horse operation with Pam’s uncle. They raised Morgans and Welsh-Cob-cross horses. Ultimately, the dairy quota was sold and the operation transitioned to grain farming. As her parents and uncle slowed down, Pam and Aaron would frequent the farm to visit and ride horses. The couple were high school sweethearts, together since the age of 16. They married in 2001. Aaron always dreamt of being a fireman and a farmer. When Pam’s uncle made retirement plans, Pam and Aaron bought into the operation by way of a succession plan that spanned over nearly a decade, from 2009 to 2018. It was a dream come true for them.

Previous to moving onto the farm, both Pam and Aaron worked full time in town – she as a speech therapist assistant and he as fireman. They also did some real estate investment – renovating a fixer-upper, a new build and a few rental properties.

Now on the farm, Aaron continues to work full time as a fireman and the two of them slowly established their own Angus-Simmental beef herd while also developing a freezer beef trade. The Speckle Park were incorporated more recently. Aaron has developed the art of feeding cattle and producing great hay under the mentorship of Pam’s dad Chris.

There was no business school or butcher training involved. The meat operation has been a natural evolution from the family’s annual steer killing and processing meat for their personal use on-farm – first on plywood on the garage floor and cutting meat in the farm kitchen, up to 2004, to converting the old dairy parlor into a butcher shop.

“Up north,” says Pam, “we are very self-sufficient.”

In 2009 they hired a Swiss butcher to work alongside them for two years, processing wild game and three to five beef animals annually. The operation grew from there. And up to 2020, they have had a total of three professional butchers work with them for different lengths of time. Their current butcher has been on board with the Tjepkemas for

nearly five years and is training another, on the job.

In the original make-shift butcher “shop”, they started with a 10’-by-16’ cooler which would comfortably hang eight animals. And in their first years, they processed about 10 beef animals annually.

During COVID, the couple invested another \$180,000 to expand their cooler space enough to accommodate 25 animals. Cattle prices at auction were low and unpredictable at the time but growing meat sales, by contrast, allowed them to control prices for their beef, thereby establishing a consistent profit margin and the ability to hire full time staff.

The farm is conveniently located eight minutes from the city of Fort St John, which makes them very accessible. They avoid shipping, by selling strictly to people in the region, which includes the Dawson Creek area. They no longer search for customers. Customers now seek them out. They also avoid deliveries. As Pam says, she can either spend a lot of time delivering beef or she can focus on producing quality beef, well processed and packaged. She prefers the latter and prides herself on a good customer experience. The future may include supporting a farmer’s market of some kind on the farm itself and may also include selling beef into local restaurants. Already, they market produce from their own market garden in the summer, made possible with the help of Pam’s mother Esther.

Family support has contributed a great deal to this couple’s success. Pam’s parents, now in their seventies, play a constant role on the farm and their cattle know-how serves the family well. Aaron and Pam’s children also take part in many aspects of the farm and shop operations. Seventeen-year-old Abel helps regularly in the meat shop. Twelve-year-old Willem and 10-year-old Jakob feed the steers twice daily. And 8-year-old daughter Holland is happy to help out however and wherever she can.

Yet farming can be lonely, as Pam points out. So she is happy to have constant contact with her meat customers.

Right: The Tjepkema Family





Left: Cattle being fed at Peace Vale Farms  
Below: Rib Eye - Peace Vale Farms



Local farmers have supported the Tjepkema family well, she says, by using their custom meat cutting services. A full two-thirds of their business comes from custom cutting. The patronage of fellow farmers has allowed the family to hire and keep great staff, before which, Pam says, they were near burnout doing everything themselves. Alongside their butcher, they have three other full-time staff, allowing Pam to play more of a managerial role in the business. Aaron sometimes works in the shop but spends much of his time occupied in his full-time work off the farm. When at home, he is mainly managing the cattle herd. They have a 40-cow herd. Production would accommodate a herd of 100 cows but land mass is their current limitation.

The Tjepkemas work with two local slaughterhouses within a 1.5-hour radius but are now applying for a license to do on-farm slaughters in the future.

“The future of our business looks strong,” says Pam.

Peace Vale offers grain-finished beef and only occasionally grass-fed beef. To ensure the quality of the grass-fed beef, they learned it was necessary to change how they manage whole segments of the operation to accommodate some later calving cows. Calves born on grass in June and July would ensure that they are ultimately finished on late summer sweet grass, as opposed to dry grass, at 18 to 24 months of age and about 1,300 to 1,400 pounds. Grass fed steers born earlier, which finish out on dry fall grass, by comparison, seemed to have tougher connective tissue, resulting in tougher meat and firmer ground beef and a strong flavor to their fat.

Their grain-fed steers are raised on pasture all summer but through the winter months, the Tjepkemas appreciate how much feeding the steers grain trains them to follow their feeder/handler, making it easier to move and handle them, which translates, ultimately, to a stress-free experience for them, all the way to slaughter.

A strict economic goal for the operation has been to raise as many animals as possible on their limited 220 acres and some leased land. Having experimented with several crosses, the Tjepkemas have found the

1,100 to 1,200 Speckle Park-influence cows to be most efficient, weaning comparable calf weights on less feed, relative to heavier cows.

From the butcher shop perspective, above all else, what they love about the Speckle Park-influence cattle, in Pam’s words, is this: “Their fat distribution is remarkable.”

“Fat is dispersed between the cuts and within the cuts,” she says. “And they produce less waste.” Other breeds of beef cattle with comparable carcass weights of 750 to 800 pounds, consistently produce 150 pounds of excess waste product she says, and much of their fat is laid down along their topline. And as Pam explains, they just aren’t able to fully utilize leggy carcasses at their shop yet.

Shorter legged Speckle Park make for less waste because very few customers are interested in the shanks.

“Customers are happier to pay for meat in the freezer versus soup bones and waste,” says Pam.

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And marbling is achieved, she says, even when barley feeding isn’t precisely consistent. The odd day can be missed by their busy family when their kids miss a feeding. But she says the other breeds weren’t so forgiving if you missed an otherwise regular feeding routine.

Pam admits that there are outliers in every breed, in terms of carcass

traits and genetic expression. So they carefully choose the lines that have worked, based on cow families, while currently aiming for a cow size under 1,500 pounds.

“If she can’t fit through the chute, she can’t stay at Peace Vale Farm,” says Pam, with a chuckle.

Conformation-wise, they breed for full hips, strong, straight toplines and full briskets. They cull mainly for bad feet, problem udders and large dam weights.

While they own a few Speckle Park cows, their program mainly involves putting high quality registered Speckle Park bulls on their largely Angus-Simmental cow base.

What Pam appreciates most on an ideal day on the farm is when she and Aaron can take their morning coffee and walk through the cowherd at sunrise. As a family, they love the fall roundup to bring cows home off pasture. But Pam herself also highly appreciates the pride of a quality piece of meat on the table. She is a “people person”, enjoying working with her staff and especially enjoying the experience of walking customers through custom cutting instructions to ensure they get what they want

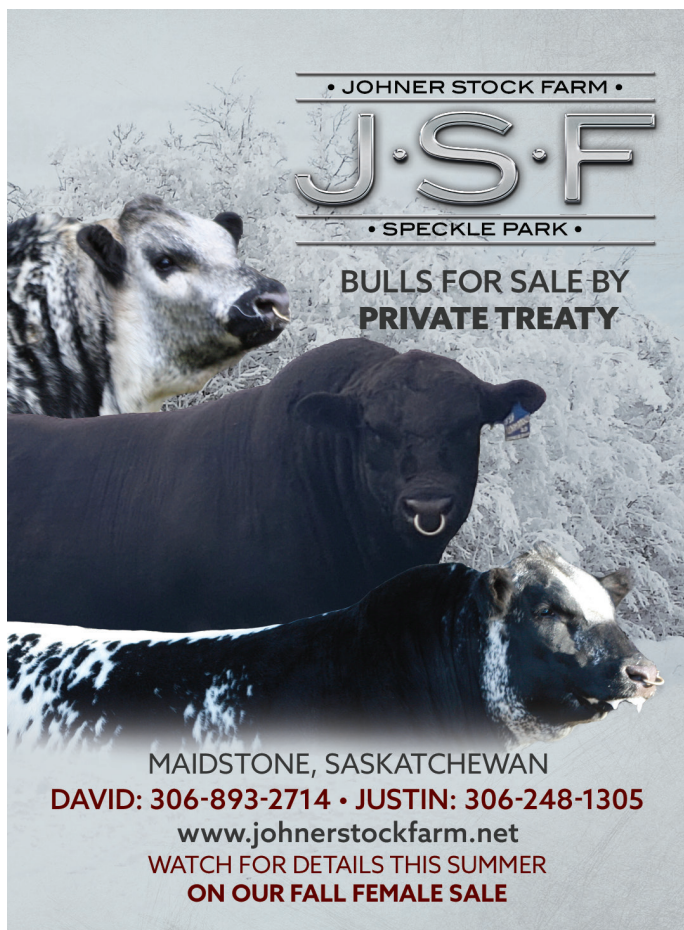
and need. She prides herself in taking care of her customers, in part, by being transparent about their meat sources and quality.

Aaron is the visionary, always dreaming up the next rendition of their business.

Addressing the “waste” issue, the couple is contemplating the production of tallow balm – used as skin moisturizing cream - and produced with one of the bi-products of the meat cutting process. They figure the production of tallow balm will make use of up to 10 pounds of tallow for each animal slaughtered.

Pam says visitors of foreign countries to the farm are appalled at the amount of waste that conventional North American butchering produces, in terms of organ meats, tallow, fat, offal and bones.

“Both of us hate waste,” says Pam. While they compost their own butcher shop waste, they consider it their mission to close the loop on waste, in general. Spin-off products are one solution. But very important in that equation is the efficient, productive Speckle Park cow and the reliable quality end-product that she produces. The proof in the pudding is in the eating, in other words.



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