

# Giddy Up! Five Alberta Ranches

by DIANA NG

Calgary isn't known as Cowtown for nothing. While oil and gas seems to dominate Alberta-related news, the agriculture industry is a major economic driver and source of pride for the province.

The largest cattle-producing province in Canada, Alberta makes up for 44 percent of the country's production, contributing \$12.7 billion to the economy through beef, and exporting roughly half of its beef to other provinces within the country.

There are more than 20,000 beef cattle producers in the province, but here are five doing extraordinary work in producing high quality beef.

## Brant Lake Wagyu

It's no secret that Alberta beef is lauded for its high quality at home and abroad, but standing out from the pack is Brant Lake Wagyu, which produces a highly

coveted, Wagyu-cross herd of about 1,000 cattle yearly.

Since operations began in 1990, when the Ball family started raising and breeding Wagyu, the ranch has expanded to breeding Wagyu-Angus cross, trademarking the brand in 2012. Though the ranch supplies domestically as well as internationally (and increasingly in Asia), the heart of the operation remains fairly lean, with about six people directly raising and caring for the herd.

Wagyu cattle is fed up to three times longer than commercial cattle, which makes for a higher grade of beef even above USDA Prime and Canada Prime. It's not only chefs trying to snatch up all of BLW's products, as we can probably tell from the mentions on numerous menus — consumers can get their hands on Wagyu ground beef, patties, sausage, charcuterie and jerky at local farmers' markets, butcher shops and even online.

## Pine Haven Colony

Completely the opposite from typical commercial cattle ranching, Pine Haven Hutterite Colony — located just outside of Wetaskiwin — takes a more holistic, communal approach to farming.

Established in 1997 and home to about 20 families, Pine Haven Colony emphasizes animal welfare and the benefits sustainable farming brings to the consumer. Starting with beef, Pine Haven herds are fed 100 percent grass diet. Hogs are raised without antibiotics or hormones on a vegetarian diet of locally grown grain from their own farm. All other animals like chickens, turkeys and ducks are also free-run and grain-fed.

The self-sufficient colony raises all its own poultry, hogs and cattle, and sells them at the on-site retail store in order to control the quality and practices of animals at every stage.

## Benchmark Angus

Back in 1960, Doug Munton started Alcan Angus with his first Black Angus female. The third generation family-run ranch eventually evolved into Benchmark Angus in 2003, when the heart of Alberta's agricultural industry was hit after a Canadian cow south of the border was found with a bout of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), better known as mad cow disease. This prompted Doug's son, Mike, to make changes on all levels — starting with breeding.

Brant Lake Wagyu



Today, Mike Benchmark has four full-time staff on the ranch and 17 on the meat production side to keep up with increasing demand. Get an unadulterated taste of Benchmark Angus' products with its natural Angus beef patty or flavourful sausages and jerky.

### **Primo Valley Beef Co.**

It may seem like a stretch for clothing designers to venture into agriculture, but Dan and Joanne Berezan — the entrepreneurs behind Dolly Varden Outdoor Clothing — were always passionate about life on the ranch.

Upon realizing they shared a common vision with their neighbours, former NHL player Dean Kennedy and his wife Tammy, about sustainable ranching, the couples started Primo Valley. Just south of Pincher Creek, this 3,500-acre ranch raises natural, hormone-free, antibiotic-free, grass-fed and Alberta barley-finished Alberta Angus beef.

It was an eye-opening experience for the ranchers when they realized the disparity between the retail price of high quality beef, and the premium that ranchers are paid. The couples brought their business savvies to the operation, selling and delivering directly to consumers to reduce costs.

From the feed to aging the meat for 21 days to packaging the beef in

individual vacuum-sealed bags, Primo Valley considers the final taste and experience for all their consumers.

### **Silver Sage**

Another ranch that supplies multiple top restaurants in Calgary with naturally raised beef is Silver Sage

Beef. Consumers may know the name from its popular shop and burger bar at the Calgary Farmers' Market, but its products are as popular with chefs as they are with the home cook.

The 100-year-old Zentner family-run ranch 14,000-acres south of Cypress Hills is home to 1,500 Angus and Gelbvieh cattle. Not only do the Zentners raise hormone-free and antibiotic-free cattle, they also raise them humanely and in a detail oriented way, carefully choosing only bulls and heifers that exhibit desirable qualities like health, size and marbling.

Consumers can pick up Silver Sage beef directly from its shop at the Calgary Farmers' Market or high-end retail outlets like Blush Lane.

*Diana Ng is a co-founder of Eat North and freelance writer who will eat your food when you're not looking.*

**RAMEN FROM SCRATCH**

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