



Meghan and Brad Austin work on adding value to their product so their daughter, Emma, can come back to the farm later.

## North Florida couple uses beef cattle strategies to improve bottom line. They'll work for you, too.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

In 2009, Brad and Meghan Eade Austin came back to Meghan's family dairy with the goal of cutting expenses and labor. As a result, Brad says, "We run it like a beef operation."

Those same management strategies work equally well on a beef operation. Here's a rundown:

### CHOOSE A BREED ADAPTED TO YOUR AREA AND OPERATION

Meghan's parents, Dale and Cindy Eade, milked Holsteins on the Marianna, Fla., operation, but now, almost the entire 300-cow milk string at Cindale Farms is made up of Jerseys and Jersey-Holstein crosses. While the Austins don't advocate switching

to Jerseys in a beef herd, their reasoning is beef-friendly.

"We changed because of body size, heat tolerance and grazing ability," says Brad, who has a doctorate in beef cattle nutrition. "With Jerseys, you can select more of a grazing-type animal, one with a lot of capacity."

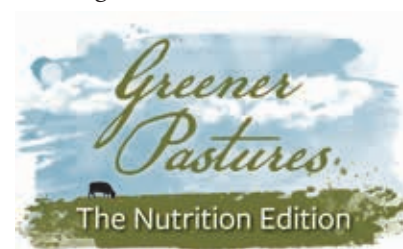
Meghan, a veterinarian, adds, "No matter where you are in the country, use an animal that is adapted."

Brad stresses, however, that you still have to keep an eye on your

end markets. In the Austins' case, that means using Angus sires on part of their dairy cows.

"If I have a cow that isn't very productive, or I'm going to cull her, I breed her to an Angus sire," he says. "ABS has a beef-on-dairy sire line that is specifically selected for calving ease and high fertility."

He adds: "Everybody loves a black calf, and I get a \$30 to \$40 premium for a 2-day-old bull calf. They can raise it and sell it at weaning or feed it out."



### HAVE A CONTROLLED BREEDING SEASON

The Austins' reasoning is the same you hear at many beef extension meetings. They wanted to concentrate their labor. In their case, they didn't want to have to check heat and check for calving cows year-round, or raise calves one at a time.

Now, with a spring- and fall-calving season, their cows breed and calve in two shortened seasons, and they can raise their calves as a group.

Clemson University Animal Scientist Matt Burns says the list of advantages to a controlled breeding season is even longer for beef producers.

"You can supplement or provide grazing to meet the needs of all the cows during specific times of the production cycle," he says.

Otherwise, you may be trying to feed pregnant dry cows that have lower nutritional needs at the same



time as lactating cows that need higher-quality forages.

There's also marketing.

"Calves born in the first 21 days weigh, on the average, 100 pounds (lb.) more at weaning," Burns says. "Group marketing will give a premium of \$4 to \$10 a hundredweight (cwt.)."

It's also an advantage if you raise your own replacement heifers.

Says Burns: "Heifers born early in the calving season are more likely to breed early in the breeding season and maintain that advantage for almost nine years of production."

### GRAZE MORE, FEED LESS

"It is cheaper to let the self-propelled forage harvesters and manure spreaders harvest the forage instead of mowing it down, raking it, baling it, wrapping it and feeding it back to them," says Brad. "Whether you're a pasture-based dairy or a beef producer, you're a grass farmer first."

While the cows do have access to a total mixed ration (TMR) in a feed barn, they now spend most of their time grazing. When the Eades bought the dairy in 2004, it came with a center-pivot irrigation system covering about 65 acres. They sprigged half of it to Tifton 85 Bermuda grass. They planted the other half in millet and sorghum-sudan, which they put up as baleage. Now it is in crabgrass and volunteer signal grass and alexander grass.

"Five years ago we started adding seeded crabgrass and continued for three years. Now we have a good enough base it reseeds," says Brad. "We've had such good luck with the tropical grasses, and we don't have to replant them."

In the fall, all the acreage under the pivot is no-tilled with a mix of oats, ryegrass, triticale and crimson clover.

"The more things you can have in a field, the better," says Brad. "These different species, different roots in the ground and beneficial



At Cindale Farms, the cows, rather than machinery, harvest the forage.

microbes are good for soil health."

To get the most out of the forages, the Austins use temporary electric fence and practice rotational grazing. Depending on the season, the weather and growing conditions, they'll have anywhere from eight or nine on up to 18-19 temporary paddocks on the 65-acre field.

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**"No matter where you are in the country, use an animal that is adapted." — Meghan Eade Austin**

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"Look at a field that's grazed 100% of the time," Brad explains. "There will be spots bare as a concrete floor, and corners where the grass will be shin-deep because that's where the manure is. Rotational grazing makes it more uniform and keeps it from being overgrazed and undergrazed."

When to move to the next paddock is an art and a science.

The rule of thumb is to take half, leave half of the forage before moving to the next field, Brad says. "Even if there is a lot of forage, the cows get bored if we leave them in the same paddock for several days, and they won't graze as well the second day. We throw the grazing rules out the window. Pay attention to the cows. They'll train you."

When they're prepping the paddocks to no-till the winter forages, they break the rules again and graze down close, especially

on the Tifton 85 Bermuda grass, Meghan says. "We have to be very intentional grazing it in the fall so it isn't too tall when we overseed."

If it is rainy and muddy, the Austins will also break the grazing rules.

"I'll overgraze a field if I need to for the betterment of the rest of the fields," Brad says. "We had a rainy winter several years ago, and the field I left the cows in looked like you had disced it. In two years the Tifton 85 had come around. It will heal."

If you don't use rotational grazing, Brad recommends giving it a try.

"Start simple. Buy a fence charger and cut your field in half," he advises. "Graze half of it for seven days, then move them and graze another seven days. It will make a difference."

### BUY HAY INSTEAD OF GROWING IT YOURSELF

"We can buy hay cheaper than we can grow it and put it up ourselves," says Brad. "Plus, it takes time. Monetarily and stress-wise, it is so much better. I write a check, and forage appears."

The key is to develop relationships with local hay growers and understand that quality is weather-dependent, he says. "Whether we were putting it up ourselves or buying it, it is never as good a quality as you want, but you can work around it."

Jose Dubeux, University of Florida forage agronomist, agrees,

especially for smaller-scale beef producers.

"Buy hay so you don't have to invest in the equipment," he encourages.

However, he recommends taking another practice from the Austins' playbook for grazing more. Even without the advantage of the lengthy north Florida growing season, Dubeux says there are usually forages in most areas that work for stockpiling.

"Even if you need to supplement with molasses or urea, it is still cheaper than buying hay," he says. "With the current prices of fertilizer, which are very high, it is costly to have to replenish the nutrients in a hay production system. With grazing, you can recycle most of those nutrients."

"You also have to factor in the losses of feeding hay," he continues. "You can lose 30%, on up to 50%, of the hay when you're feeding it."

### LOOK AT THE LONG VIEW

"When we came back to the farm, we were young and had ideas. Thankfully most of them worked," says Brad.

The Austins aren't stopping with the dairy, though. They are working with Meghan's parents to expand a milk-bottling and ice cream enterprise. While Southern Craft Creamery currently only uses 7%-10% of Cindale Farms' milk, it takes a large investment in time and dollars. However, Brad says the dairy is in the same situation as many beef operations.

"A dairy of this size isn't viable," he explains. "We want to make sure we're sustainable so our daughter, Emma (9), can come back if she wants to."

He adds, "It is hard to look at things from the 30,000-foot view when you have things right in front of you that need to be done, but we try to play the long game and wait to see results in two, five, 10 years." |

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Editor's note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlegirl from Cuthbert, Ga. For more information on Southern Craft Creamery and Cindale Farms, visit [www.southerncraftcreamery.com](http://www.southerncraftcreamery.com).