



Daphna and Terry Chrane say they don't get to eat their own steaks anymore because they are always presold.

ADAPT & PRESERVE

Three-generation ranch adapts to markets to preserve 114-year-old operation.

Story & photos by Kasey Brown, associate editor

When a ranch survives for 114 years, there is wisdom to be gained from those owners. Terry and Daphna Chrane are the third generation to manage Chrane Ranch, Dudley, Texas, and have certainly seen some changes. Adaptability, they say, is the name of the game.

They've participated in every segment of the industry, primarily stockers and a feedlot for a time.

"The market showed us that cow-calf was the way to go," Daphna says.

Preferring to manage cows and calves than the markets was a big plus, adds Terry, but the decision came from listening to market signals.

They partner with Terry's

parents and merged their commercial Angus herds in 2010.

Doing things differently

Listening to the markets, they realized the area had a great demand for high-quality freezer beef free of antibiotics and growth promotants. Friends and family liked their beef, and Daphna says they used to sell halves and whole carcasses. She says a friend told

her, "You know, you can sell meat out at the [Abilene] Farmers' Market."

They sold a whole beef in one week at the Abilene Farmers' Market. No one else sold freezer beef at the market, and it was incredibly popular.

The Abilene Farmers' Market sells on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 7 a.m. to noon, from May to August. The Chranes have been selling there for 10 years now.

Daphna says she has seen trends, but every year is different. Popular cuts are half briskets; tenderized

rounds; half chuck roasts, which Daphna calls "Crock-Pot® roasts;" arm roasts; hamburger; stew meat; and fajita meat.

During the off-season, they sell beef through the farmers' market Facebook page, and their own Facebook, Instagram and Twitter platforms. Daphna also sends out a newsletter, through which people can preorder steaks. She admits she's already out of ribeyes for the next batch of calves.

She laughs and says she and Terry don't even get to eat their own steaks anymore because they are always presold.

They can sell grass-fed beef also, but customers need to order it in advance. Daphna says she and Terry spend a lot of time explaining that the difference between grass-finishing and grain-finishing with continued access to grass is mostly just taste.

Demand grew so much they changed their breeding season into a continual breeding season, so they have calves ready throughout the year.

"We do it a little differently now. We stage cattle for our beef sales. We used to shoot for 'normal' uniform calves at the same time, selling them at the sale barn," Terry says. "Now, with our beef sales, we need calves at different times of the year."

Laughing, he adds: "It was way more convenient to have set calving seasons."

Selling freezer beef relies on relationships — at the farmers' market, with customers and with their processor, too. They generally send four head to the processor per month, and they have to schedule it a year out. Daphna says Monty at Cox Processing goes above and beyond. He helped her get their own private label and will do some specialty cuts, like fajita meat.

The biggest issue they run into is storage, but that's a problem they are soon fixing. They have a walk-in vault freezer in their front barn,



but they are building a storefront at the ranch with another walk-in vault freezer.

The storefront building, “the Market,” was an original building of Terry’s grandfather. It was in desperate need of repair or would need to be demolished, but Terry and Daphna decided the piece of history was worth preserving and rebuilt it.

Managing for quality

Selling high-quality meat with their name on it means they take pride and special care in their management practices.

They maintain a closed herd for females, keeping their own replacement heifers. They’ve tried bringing in outside bred cows to make up some of the time of developing replacement heifers, but it wasn’t worth it.

“It costs the same maintenance for good cows as it does mediocre ones. Those cows weren’t high-enough quality. Those heifers we keep will earn their keep soon. We put stock in our own stock,” Terry says.

Chrane Ranch is a debt-free ranch, a moniker not many can claim. They work hard to sustain it, by constant maintenance of equipment, trying to rebuild 1 mile of fence per year, among other things. They also feed mostly by grazing pasture. Finishing calves economically has been a lesson learned with experience. Their calves on feed get as much roughage as they want.

They buy outside bulls to maintain genetic outcrosses and pay close attention to terminal expected progeny differences (EPDs). Those bulls have to pay for themselves, too.

They buy their bulls from 44 Farms’ Abilene operation, so the bulls are suited to the environment. Relationships again play a part, and their seedstock provider helps provide helpful information.



To supply their freezer-beef market, the Chranes changed to a continual breeding season so they could have calves ready throughout the year.

“They’re genetically predisposed to be meat producers,” Terry says. “If you’re not improving, you’re backing up.”

He brings out a heavily marked-up sale book denoting which bulls meet his criteria for ribeye area, marbling, weaning weight, yearling weight, docility, calving ease and yield.

They breed by pasture groups. So, while carcass information comes back slowly, it can be traced back to the appropriate bull and cow families. The cattle rotate pastures constantly.

Terry and Daphna both agree rotation is a big part of life at Chrane Ranch. They work cattle on horseback, and they walk to each pasture quietly. They aim to

keep the cattle on fresh grass as much as possible. Each pasture either has stock water, well water or a spring. Brush control is a constant task with maintaining pastures, which is done mechanically and then burning the brush piles.



The Chranes worked with their meat processor to create their own private label for their meat to sell directly to their customers.

Keeping cattle stress-free is a big objective for the Chranes. They are big proponents that no stress equals no illness, especially since they take their commitment to no antibiotics seriously. Naturally, if a

calf needs an antibiotic, they will get it, but that calf will then be sold commercially at the sale barn. Only one calf in 2018 needed medicine.

To maintain health, they avoid stress at loading or working times. Calves get vaccinations for blackleg and tetanus. All the cattle are acclimated to being around humans. They ensure their feed is all natural by working with their milling company, and feed high-quality range cubes, cottonseed cake and mineral year-round. They also leave calves on their mamas a bit longer.

They use fenceline weaning to lower stress. They admit the calves still bawl for several days, but they can still see mama right across the fence, even though water for mamas is about a quarter-mile away.

They admit this is where generational differences come in. Terry’s dad hates seeing calves penned up, so he wants to take calves straight away from mama.

Terry and Daphna prefer letting them see mama, and have seen improved performance and lower stress levels with fenceline weaning.

Lower-stress management is just one of the differences between generational management, but they

say following the markets has allowed them to stay in business. Much has changed since Terry’s grandfather George started the ranch, but the important things stay the same.

Family working together is paramount, and their grandchildren are the fifth generation to help on the ranch. Each family member has helped in some way to prepare the Market. Caring for cattle and the land has stayed the same, too. They are following and adapting to the markets, so future generations can keep the ranch. ■

Surviving tough times

The Chrane Ranch was established in 1905 when George Chrane bought 160 acres and built a house, still called “the home place,” near Abilene, Texas. Soon after, he moved his family south to Dudley, Texas. Business was good, and George expanded acreage and cattle.

The Great Depression and heavy drought caused land losses, but George Chrane was determined. An orphan who turned into a self-made man, he worked hard, buying neighbors’ cattle to truck them to Fort Worth. He used the profit to buy back his land.

Terry Chrane, George’s grandson, says his grandfather was incredibly humble, but would share proudly that he bought parts of his ranch twice.