

Market Mission

Georgia producer gives himself more marketing options with an on-farm harvest and processing plant.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor



It was one of those costly life lessons. In the early 2000s, Kyle Potts and his family transitioned out of the commercial layer hen business and began backgrounding and finishing cattle.

“Depending on the price of cattle and feed, we would go back and forth between selling feeder cattle or finishing and shipping them,” Potts explains. “In 2014, when prices were so good, we made a good bit of money. In 2015 and 2016, when the dust settled, it turned out we almost broke even because the price was so volatile and came down so suddenly. We had so much more money in those cattle that ultimately sold on the back half of the whole deal. It made us realize how tough it was.”

Most of the cattle the Jefferson, Ga., family backgrounded and/or fed were bought off the farm or in local stockyards. After finishing, Kyle’s father, Jeff, would haul cattle to Pennsylvania three times a month and sell them. On both ends, they were at the mercy of the current market.

“In such a volatile market, like beef cattle, it’s just hard,” says Kyle. “You can’t have expectations or make assumptions, because you don’t know what the market is going to do.”

More control

Enter Potts Family Meats, which allows them to harvest, process and sell their own finished beef.

“We felt like it was the best way to control a percentage of the cattle value. In the years when the market is tough for selling feeder calves or fat cattle, it helps having that processing plant,” he says.

The demand for local beef is another plus, for their own operation and for other farms, he says, joking, “We just wanted more work to do.”

Now, 35-40 head of 1,000-pound (lb.) to 1,400-lb. steers and heifers are in the finishing lot year-round. Two or three head are harvested and processed each week and sold as halves, wholes or as individual cuts

Kyle Potts says adding a harvesting and processing facility to the family farm will give them more control over the price they get for their cattle.

in the retail part of the facility. In total, 30-40 head come through the plant weekly, the rest from other producers. Every carcass is USDA-inspected.

Pure Angus

The Potts started in 2019 by leasing a nearby harvest and processing facility, but finished their own facility in January 2022. However, the 50-foot (ft.)-by-100-ft. building with an offset on the back isn’t the only change they made. In 2014, under Kyle’s direction, they started to transition to purebred Angus.

“We had a commercial cow-calf operation. We’d get the cows up a few times a year to wean the calves and pay some bills,” he says.

But he wanted something better.

“I’ve always been more passionate about making something, creating something that has a lot more quality to it,” he explains.

“I’m more interested in pedigrees and genetics.”

Now, Potts Bros. is home to around 300 cows. Half of those are registered Angus, while the rest are commercial cows used for embryo transfer (ET) recipients. Calves from both herds can find their way to Potts Family Meats. If a commercial cow doesn’t carry an embryo and is bred to a cleanup bull, her calf goes to the finishing side of the operation. It’s the same for a purebred Angus calf if it isn’t the quality Potts demands for his Angus herd.

“Having the market to sell beef allows you to sharpen your knife even more,” he says. “A bull might be a better-than-average bull, but he’ll be great freezer beef.”

Potts says he currently has 80 bull calves that are eligible for registration. He typically has buyers for 50.

“I already know of 20 I’ll cut,” he says. “It may be a docility issue or a foot issue or a lack of performance.”

Potts usually markets his bull calves and a few females through the Cowboy Logic sale in Talmo with friend and sale partner Cole Elrod.

“I culled two bulls three days before the last sale and ran them through the plant. They did fine,” Potts notes.

He and Elrod will also take a heifer out of their replacement pens if she doesn’t meet their specs. The result of the strict culling is not only better purebred herds for both operations, but top-quality beef for Potts’ customers.

“We’ve harvested and processed a lot of beef even before we had our own plant,” Potts says. “It is very, very seldom I’ve seen anything come through less than Choice.”

Potts checks carcass quality and estimates marbling score strictly for

his own use. Still, when he first opened the plant, he hired a USDA grader to officially stamp the first 39 head he harvested, all out of his commercial cows. One was Select, 28 were Choice and 10 were Prime.

“If anything, being able to take the hide off our own beef just assures the fact that Angus cattle have a very high-quality carcass,” he says. “You don’t have to run off the tracks as far as EPDs (expected progeny differences) go to gain ground on carcass merit.”

“We believe there is a balance there of all those traits,” he continues. “You can’t focus solely on maternal characteristics or carcass quality or growth or calving ease. It’s just got to be a balanced product. If you stick to a balanced product, everything works better.”

Some challenges

While Potts says he would build the harvest and processing facility again, and

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Kyle Potts

would do it sooner, there have been challenges.

“The permitting process was strenuous,” he explains. “Some of those permits we didn’t even know we had to have until we were building it. We got through it, though.”

University of Georgia meat scientist Alex Stelzleni isn’t surprised.

“A lot more goes into it than people think,” he says. “Make sure you fully understand the permits needed before you start.”

Stelzleni says permits needed can range from those required in local municipalities to state and federal permits, including those needed for meat inspection to environmental regulations.

There is also the actual building process. Potts and senior plant manager of the facility, Donell Sealey, drew up the rough plans, but it took engineers to do the formal design.

“It wasn’t cheap,” he emphasizes. “Be extra picky about who you contract to build, because it’s not *if* you’re going to have issues, but *when*. You need to be able to depend on a contractor to hold up their end of the bargain.”

Potts escaped one of the biggest challenges most processors face — finding qualified labor. Sealey and his family have been in the harvest and processing business for years, and they came as a team.

Apparently, it wasn’t all luck. John Watson, assistant plant manager, says: “That’s the great part of working here at Potts Family Meats. When you go to work for them, you become their family.”

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Kyle Potts started a purebred Angus enterprise on the family farm in 2014 because he likes to create things of value.



In the future, Potts wants to harvest, process and sell around 1,500 head a year of cattle from his own genetics. The market is there. Jackson County borders counties that are bedroom communities of Atlanta and is a favorite commuter option for

Athens. He's already expanding to online sales with local delivery.

"Obviously 300 cows would have a hard time doing that," he says of his goal. "Land is so valuable here it doesn't make sense to expand."

He plans to meet the growing demand by buying back calves from his bull customers.

Another potential challenge is the number of smaller processors that are popping up all over Georgia.

"That's why we're selling our own products," he says. "It takes a little time. It's

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more of a reputation thing and word of mouth. We're slowly building that, hoping that when there is a saturation of local products, we'll be ahead of the curve."

He's safe for the time being, says Stelzleni. "Georgia, and the Southeast, have been in a deficit for plants for quite a while. It shows in the struggle to get qualified labor."

John Watson isn't worried. Between the people and the cattle at Potts Family Meats, he says, "We have a very good clientele that come to us because of the quality of our employees, the quality of our work, and the quality of the beef. We go the extra mile."

For Potts, adding that enterprise is a chance to call more of the shots in marketing with a value-added product.

"It is a way to control a percentage of the cattle value," he surmises, adding once again, "I'm passionate about creating something of value." **ABB**

Editor's note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlewoman from Cuthbert, Ga.

