

# Pride of Product



*Expansive, family-owned business is unique in approach, steady in success.*

*Story & photos by  
KIM HOLT, field editor*

The Harris Ranch legacy may have begun with cotton and grain farmed by Jack Harris in the 1930s, but today this family-owned company, set in California's western San Joaquin Valley, is best known for its high-quality natural beef, which retails under the Harris Ranch Beef label and brand.

John Harris, Jack's only son, built up the family's small cattle business in the 1960s and, in doing so, made the decision to take the beef direct to the consumer.

He explains, "We were looking, like any farmer or rancher, how

we could return more money back to the product. It was financially motivated, but it was always a pride of product."

It's this pride of product that is reflected in everything Harris Ranch today, from its people to its products.

#### **Five divisions of Harris Ranch**

Five divisions make up the family-owned and -operated Harris Ranch, the largest cattle feeder, beef processor and beef marketer in California, unique in its integrated approach to cattle sourcing, feeding and processing.

The feedlot, Harris Ranch Feeding Co., is one of the largest cattle-finishing facilities in the western United States. In 1965,

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— Brad Caudill

there were 10,000 cattle on feed. Fast-forward to today: This feedlot covers nearly 800 acres with the capacity to feed up to 120,000 head at one time.

"One of the unique things about this feeding operation compared to the Midwest is the weather," says Brad Caudill, vice president of marketing for Harris Ranch Beef Co. "Winters are very, very mild. We will get 5 to 6 inches of rain on a good year, but the cattle perform very well."

Caudill points out, "On the beef side of things, we are unique in that we control all aspects of production from where the cattle come from. We have longstanding relationships with producers, whether they are in

## Storied beef

"Clovis likes its beef," assures Rick Lemos, meat department manager for Save Mart® Supermarket #98 in Clovis, Calif. The high-quality, branded beef featured in his store's retail case is Angus, specifically Harris Ranch Natural Angus Beef™.

Chris Boele, who oversees District 7 meat sales for Save Mart, explains that his district's stores have featured the Harris Ranch program for more than a year.

"With the 40 to 45 SKUs (stock keeping units) we have for Harris Ranch beef, we've

**Retailers team up with Harris Ranch to help customers enjoy a natural, locally raised eating experience every time.**

gotten good feedback all around from just about every demographic. It's a local product, and with the quality of the Harris Ranch beef that we're carrying, we're developing quite a following."

A following by consumers is welcomed by retailers. Boele explains that center-of-the-plate foods, namely proteins, drive shoppers to stores, and the remainder of their shopping expands from there.

Harris Ranch Beef Co. Marketing Director Brad Caudill says that 80%-

85% of Harris Ranch branded beef is sold at retail. "Most of it is here in the West," he says,

including California, Oregon and Nevada. This company's flagship natural beef program is based on the Angus breed.

Harris Ranch Natural Angus Beef is marketed as grain-fed, and, according to USDA's definition of natural, is — "minimally processed with no artificial ingredients or preservatives." Harris Ranch's added safety measures include testing feed for pesticide residues and testing finished beef for antibiotic residues beyond USDA guidelines.

#### **Beef with a story**

Harris Ranch promotes transparency and prides itself in sharing its story, especially with meat-department managers who can, in turn, tell





**Above:** The Angus Partnership for Quality (PQ) program accounts for about 15%-20% of the cattle in this feedyard, which prefers to bring in seven-weight yearlings that will gain from 3.0 lb. to 3.5 lb. per day and finish at 1,150-1,200 lb.

our Angus Partnership for Quality (PQ) program or they are ranchers whom we have been doing business with for generations.”

Harris Ranch Feeding places major emphasis on humane and ethical treatment of animals — heightened by its location next to I-5. The feedlot was actually in place before this freeway — considered the “lifeline of the state” — was built, connecting southern, central and northern population centers, including traffic from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

Ken Zeman, mill superintendent for Harris Feeding Co., explains they’ve been working to implement shade over the past four years. About 80% of pens are under

shade cloth, adding to cattle comfort and feed efficiency.

Sprinklers are used to reduce dust and cool cattle in summer months. They are cognizant of how they’re used, especially this past summer, because of reduced rainfall and mandated water supply cuts in the Central Valley (see inset at right).

Zeman also points out that, through the years, Temple Grandin has been involved in different capacities in both Harris’ feeding and processing operations. He recalls that Grandin was very complimentary of the cleanliness of the feedyard and the feedmill, too, which Zeman oversees with great pride.

The pens in this feedyard are routinely scraped and manure is composted on-site.

“We generate \$2.5-\$3 million in manure sales per year through composting some 150,000 tons,” Zeman says. The compost is tested and sold certified-organic and pathogen-free. It’s put back onto fields owned by Harris Farms and other neighboring farmers.

Zeman also explains that Harris has its own trucking fleet, allowing it control of its commodities, including liquids. Cattle at Harris are fed a balanced diet, which features corn shipped in every other week from the Midwest on 110-car grain trains and, afterward, is steam-flaked in a Harris milling facility and trucked to the feedlot.

With 100,000 head of cattle on feed, he says Harris will go through 1,300 tons of feed each day on their slick-bunk program. Cattle also receive vitamin E, and Harris was one of the leaders in its testing and adoption.

Vitamin E helps extend beef shelf life at retail anywhere from 12 to 24 hours, Caudill says, which is a long period of time to that sector. Because of its cost, he says that Harris is actually one of the few remaining feedlots supplementing

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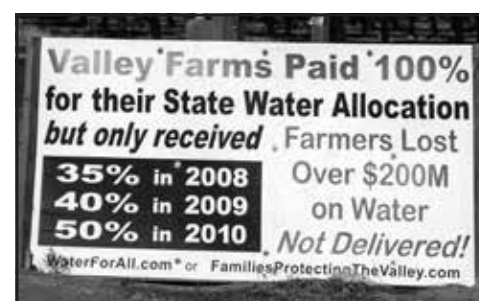
Harris Farms is one of the West’s largest privately owned farms and one of more than 700 family farms in its Central Valley water district. Water is a big concern for Central Valley agriculturists, like Harris Farms, which is one of Fresno County’s largest employers.

This past growing season, more than 200 billion gallons of water were diverted to the ocean — instead of to irrigate productive Central Valley farmlands — in order to protect the

endangered Delta smelt, which is listed as a threatened species under federal and state Endangered Species acts. It allowed farmers to only use 20% of their water allotment, causing some fields to go unplanted.

William Bourdeau, executive vice president of Harris Farms, says the Delta smelt affects lives.

“It’s a human crisis,” he emphasizes, “if people who can grow safe food, and are very good at it, can’t do their jobs, and others can’t afford to feed their families.” More than 250 products are grown in California, with the San Joaquin Valley one of our nation’s most productive food-producing areas.



Harris Ranch Beef Co.’s owner John Harris (center) is pictured with Brad Caudill (left), vice president of marketing, and William Bourdeau, executive vice president of Harris Farms.

the Harris Ranch story with confidence to consumers.

Boele, Lemos and Randy Banuelos, meat manager for Save Mart Supermarket #87 in Clovis, have all toured Harris Ranch from gate to plate, discovering this beef company’s story firsthand.

“Harris Ranch is pretty impressive,” Banuelos says. He recalls the passion the “feed guy” has for his job at the feedlot and noted that he even visited with pen riders.

“They are doing everything I can see to make it humane and comfortable for the animals out there,” Banuelos says. “They’re trying to do their best to stay on the cutting edge.”

He says the time spent at Harris Ranch “definitely helps” him share the story behind the beef in his meatcase. “I am more informed about telling the customers from farm to plate,” Banuelos remarks.

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The clean and bright “Butcher Block” at Save Mart #98 in Clovis, Calif., helps Meat Department Manager Rick Lemos interact with clientele. “We know how these customers like their meat cut,” he says. Lemos, who’s been cutting meat 38 years, 25 of those with Save Mart, says, “If customers are going to buy out of the butcher block, they want good-quality steaks to grill,” as they grill year-round in Clovis. His specialty is 1½-inch thick-cut ribeyes, a favorite he especially appreciates for flavor.

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vitamin E to extend beef shelf life.

This feedyard also sets itself apart with its state-of-the-art truck-washing facility in which cattle trailers are washed between each load transported to the processing facility. Caudill explains that it is part of Harris' goal to reduce contamination on the animal before it goes into the processing plant.

**Food safety efforts**

An early adopter and ongoing champion of food safety, Harris constantly tests and monitors for pesticides in feed, and safety and quality-assurance protocols are built all the way through its processing plant. Its finished beef is tested for antibiotic residues above USDA standards.

Harris Ranch Beef Co., the processing and marketing arm of the beef division, is a close one-hour's drive from the feedlot for finished cattle. With its recent expansion, the processing facility has cooler space for 900-1,000 head of cattle per week.

A leader in value-added beef, in 1982 Harris Ranch established one of the first branded-beef programs in the United

States and pioneered the development of fully cooked beef entrées in the 1990s. This company features branded product for retail, foodservice and export divisions, and an expansive product line that includes fresh boxed beef, value-added ground beef, fresh seasoned beef and fully cooked beef entrées.

A lesser-known division to the cattle industry, perhaps, is the Harris Farms division, which encompasses more than 17,000 acres and grows 35 different crops, from almonds, onions and wine grapes to pistachios, garlic and asparagus. Many of these crops are seasonally featured and paired with Harris Ranch beef at the Harris Ranch Inn & Restaurant.

This division, a well-know destination for I-5 travelers situated midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, is a true farm-to-fork destination that serves an average of 2,000 entrées daily, highlighting Harris Ranch-brand Choice and Prime beef. The restaurant was originally opened in 1977, and the Inn 10 years later.

Today, three restaurants are served by one kitchen overseen by Executive Chef Anthony Hagans. It features locally grown "from-scratch" food, a full bakery and, as one would expect, beef for breakfast. A full-service meat counter in the Inn's Country Store sells more than 120,000 pounds of fresh beef annually, similar to a grocer.

Rounding out Harris Ranch is the Thoroughbred horse division



Harris Farms, the farming division of Harris Ranch, raises 35 different crops, including fresh-packed asparagus, almonds and pistachios. India and China are its largest almond markets. These markets desire in-shell almonds, so equipment at Harris-Woolf was upgraded to fit these needs. Harris Farms works with a marketer who sells their asparagus to retail; however, they are looking to brand it as Harris Farms because of the food safety and new technology aspects they have built into this vegetable crop.



The Harris Ranch Inn & Restaurant features a 153-room inn, three restaurants, a bar and country store. The stop also features a service station, convenience store, car wash and a private landing strip.

established in the mid-1960s. This state-of-the-art farm breeds, trains and races Thoroughbreds. It stands several world-class stallions, and annually offers breeding services to more than 300 broodmares.

Many adjectives can be used to describe this expansive family-owned agribusiness. However, it only takes one visit to Harris Ranch to see that it is an American success story carried out literally from farm to fork by dedicated people with great passion and pride.



**Editor's Note:** A field editor for the Angus Journal, Kim Holt is a freelancer out of Caldwell, Idaho.



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“You couldn’t have had a better experience,” assures this 24-year Save Mart employee.

Both he and Lemos also reference their processing plant tour, where they

learned that recent modifications were made to the cattle entrance to help minimize animal stress. After a short 1-hour ride from the feedlot to the plant, cattle are offloaded onto rubber mats and into shaded pens.

Boele says understanding the Harris

Ranch story helps meat managers market this branded beef. He also believes that transparency is at the forefront of people’s thoughts when they’re shopping, more now than it used to be.

“Probably our following, our consumers, know someone who is working

or have worked with someone who works for Harris Ranch.” Boele says that from Selma to Coalinga and everywhere in between, “there is definitely a connection just with the quality of the beef. So many people recognize it.

“For Save Mart to be connected to Harris, it’s a great branding machine for both. Both companies are family companies here in the valley, so they have pretty similar stories.” Save Mart opened its first store in Modesto in 1952 and has built its business on a foundation of quality and service, much like Harris Ranch.

**Local, great taste**

Boele is a native of the San Joaquin Valley and a 32-year employee of the retail grocery business, starting as an apprentice meat cutter and working his way up. He says grocer’s meat managers haven’t had much background information on the beef they’ve sold through their meatcases up until the Harris Ranch connection.

“Because it’s local, it’s easy to sell,” Lemos relays, noting along with Banuelos that it has outsold a previous brand they carried by at least threefold. They say “local” has everything to do with this increase.

“The local here is very important,” Lemos says.

Banuelos agrees. “The customers around here are accustomed to the Harris Ranch name,” Banuelos agrees. “They’ve built up a really solid name for themselves. I have diehards say, ‘I only buy Harris Ranch.’” Customers know they’ll pay more, but for a better-quality product.

Banuelos also likes the idea of local branding for all protein products, something he has suggested to upper management. He says a local branded-beef program like Harris Ranch sets them



apart, especially with two competing food retailers recently opening near his location.

Boele adds, “I think people have a lot of confidence knowing that it came from close by. Here specifically in the San Joaquin Valley, with all of the ranchers and orchards, they are definitely supportive of USA products.”

Still, the products need to have great taste. Lemos says that local ranchers, who raise their own beef, visit his store.

“When they come see me, I have to fix them up with the best,” he assures, because they know their beef. “You have to start with a good product because customers won’t be back if they have a poor eating experience.”

Lemos has a full-service meat counter — The Butcher Block — at his store, all stocked with Harris Ranch Natural Angus Choice beef. He believes that people do recognize “Angus” and associate it with quality beef. “I think the Angus does help sell the beef,” he says.

According to Harris Ranch, market research shows consumers place Angus beef in a class of its own. Many consumers believe Angus beef to be superior in quality to USDA Choice-grade beef.

“It’s an easy sell once you taste it,” Boele says. He believes that consumers are familiar with Angus beef from their foodservice experiences, too.

“We have a definite loyal following. It’s about flavor, tenderness and taste for sure,” says Banuelos. He adds, “Customers know that Angus is high-quality.”

Harris market research has also shown that consumers equate the Harris Ranch brand with quality, consistency and safe, wholesome beef.

Third-party auditors and major quick-service restaurants (QSRs) repeatedly give Harris Ranch exceptional marks for food safety. In fact, as an industry leader, they are one of the first processors to begin final grind testing to further ensure product wholesomeness.

This is welcomed by Boele, who says, “As a retailer I am very [concerned about food safety] because we have to stand behind all of these products. We are extremely confident in how well the Harris products are managed.”

As a family-owned agribusiness, the

Harris family’s philosophy has always been to provide only the best products, care and service to customers, including retailers like Save Mart.

— **Kim Holt**

**Editor’s Note:** A field editor for the Angus Journal, Kim Holt is a freelancer out of Caldwell, Idaho.



Randy Banuelos, meat manager for Save Mart Supermarket #87 in Clovis, Calif., says that ribeye, New York steaks and tri-tips are big sellers at his store. Pre-marinated tri-tip and Harris Ranch Natural Angus Beef patties are good sellers, too, because they are quick fixes for busy consumers.