

# Grazing Jersey beef on a diversified farm

**J**oe Peterson soaked up a lot of wisdom while growing up on the North Carolina farm that has been in his family since 1858. More than once he heard old timers say that Jersey cattle make the best beef. Later his own experiences proved them to be tasty and fork tender.

Today Peterson and his wife Jean grow 30 kinds of vegetables along with herbs, pastured chicken, pork, and beef. The beef, of course, is Jersey. Peterson Farm hamburger brings \$6.25 per pound with ribeyes bringing \$16.50 and filet mignon, \$22.50.

“Very often a new customer will tell me our Jersey is the best beef they’ve ever tasted,” says Peterson. “I encourage them to put our ground beef on the grill; I think it tastes just like steak.”

Jerseys aren’t usually thought of as beef cattle with their small frames and dairy genetics, but they have received favorable evaluations in a smattering of studies comparing grain-finished carcasses of different breeds. In those studies, Jerseys dressed out smaller than the beefier breeds, but they also tended to finish at a younger age and had higher marbling scores.

Several years ago Peterson wanted to learn more about the characteristics of raising Jersey and Jersey-cross steers on pasture instead of finishing them on grain. What little data he found was 20 years old. He turned to extension agent Marti Day for help, which led to Peterson cooperating on a SARE On-Farm Research project led by Steve Washburn at the Center for Environmental Farming Systems.



Joe Peterson would rather farm than complete paperwork, so even though all the vegetables are grown without pesticides or commercial fertilizers, they are not certified for organics or anything else. The farm specializes in varieties that are big on flavor, particularly heirlooms, including a German tomato developed by Peterson’s great uncle.



Jerseys will eat most anything from crops to clover, according to Joe Peterson, but they’ll leave the fescue til last. He would like to find a perennial forage that does as well as fescue in North Carolina but is tastier to his steers. Photo by Ed Crowell

In the two-year project 44 pastured steers (Jersey and Jersey-Holstein crosses) were divided into two groups; half of them finished on pasture while the others spent their final 84 days eating concentrates. Beef from the two pastured herds was compared to choice beef from Wisconsin. Taste panel preferences averaged 39.6%, 37.5% and 21.9% for choice beef, concentrate-finished Jersey beef, and pasture-fed Jersey beef, respectively.

The fact that roughly 22% of the tasters preferred the flavor and texture of pasture-finished Jersey beef encouraged Peterson about the potential for niche marketing. The potential is even greater consumers who are seeking pastured beef for health benefits are taken into account--the pasture-finished Jersey contained only 1.7% fat compared to the concentrate-fed Jersey’s 3.7% fat and the choice beef’s whopping 5.6% fat.

Based on the research results Peterson expanded his beef operation, stocking about 30 steers of varying ages. This required fencing more acreage, planting some forages and, in extremely severe winters, buying some hay. Even with those investments, the average net profit per steer is more than \$1,000. About 10 are slaughtered as needed each year and sold along with his other crops at the Piedmont Triad Farmers Market. The steers rotate seamlessly with the other farm enterprises.

“I turn them in to clean up crops,” says Peterson. “After harvest they’ll eat squash, beans, pea vines, just about

anything. When I plant fall cover crops like rye and crimson clover, they'll graze that down in the early spring before planting time."

Peterson figured a budget for the SARE project based on handling about 30 steers per year. Weanlings are the most economical age for purchasing the steers, and they are slaughtered at two-years old. For budgeting purposes he started with a four-month old Jersey cross bull calf weighing 250 pounds and costing \$250. When the steer was slaughtered 20 months later, he weighed 840 pounds, and, after aging, produced 336 pound of saleable beef. Total input cost was \$1,218 and the meat sold for \$2,281 for a profit of \$1,063.

This project could fuel a new industry in grass-fed jersey beef, according to NCSU researcher Steve Washburn. Jersey male calves can often be purchased for as little as \$1 per pound, and they are readily available in the Southeast where many dairies use at least some Jersey bloodlines.

Joe Peterson is one of the growing number of direct market farmers who consider social media indispensable for success. Peterson Farm uses Flickr to give customers a virtual tour of the farm any day of the week at <http://www.petersonrealfood.com>

For more information about the project search the SARE data base at [www.sare.org](http://www.sare.org) for project OS06-032.



**"My daddy quit raising tobacco about the time I was big enough to help him, so I've always raised a lot of different things."**

**Joe Peterson**

Keeping more than 30 varieties of vegetables and herbs in rotation with pastured steers, hogs, laying hens and broilers is a balancing act on 48 acres, but diversity has always been the backbone of Peterson Farm, according to Joe, who believes a large, varied inventory is a must for direct marketing. The pastured beef is one more item that brings customers to his stall at the Piedmont Triad Farmers Market.

North Carolina's farm friendly policies and processing infrastructure for livestock are key to the farm's success. Steers and broilers take a short 40-mile trip to a small USDA-inspected plant. The broiler carcasses are cleaned without chlorine bleach and then air-cooled, European style--two characteristics that help them bring gourmet prices. The hogs are trucked to another facility about 60 miles away.



Peterson's pastured hogs spend their lives outdoors on pasture. Photo by Ed Crowell