

THE FACILITY
Gypsum Valley Wagyu
By Heather Smith-Thomas

In 1985 Dr. Jerry Cossette purchased a farm near Salina, Kansas – about 90 miles north of Wichita, in central Kansas, and began raising Angus cattle and wheat, row crops and forage. In 2002 his brother Jack joined the family farm as operations manager. Jack had spent 30 years in the business working with high end restaurants, hotels, and clubs. His culinary knowledge piqued his interest in the potential of raising Wagyu cattle.

In 2008 Jack and Jerry attended the first Lone Mountain sale in New Mexico, where they bought their first fullblood Wagyu bull and cows. Their farm team consists of Dr. Casey Barten, DVM, Tod Eland, marketing director, and Thomas Anderes, herdsman.

“The F1 cattle raised for meat production are backgrounded here in Kansas and finished at Phelps County Feeders in Nebraska or at A-Z Feeders in Iowa. To produce more F1’s we started selling or leasing fullblood Wagyu bulls to cooperative Angus producers and we buy back their high quality calves at a premium,” says Jack.

“We outgrew our space, and wanted to do a lot more embryo and AI work right here at home, so this is one reason we recently built our new facility. We can do all of this here now, instead of taking our animals to our veterinarian/embryologist.” The new facility allows Dr. Barten to come to the farm to AI or put embryos in.

“Last year we started focusing on more purebreds, to produce a higher-end, more consistent meat product. Our market for these animals will be the Kansas City and Wichita area, to start with. We were harvesting about 85 to 90% prime on the F1 program, selling them to different companies around the U.S., but now we are focusing more on the purebreds. Three years ago we bought a purebred herd from Michael Goodell of Augusta, Wisconsin, the past president of the AWA, and brought those cattle here to Kansas. We flush these cows and put embryos into our F1 heifers, recip and commercial Angus herd,” Jack says.

In August 2015 the feeding facility was completed. “In early December we finished the breeding shed,” says Thomas. “We created a 36 by 80 foot indoor working facility with calving stalls, chute, etc. so we can do all our embryo transfers and AI right here. We’ve been doing this for a while and we’ve found that the less stress, and the less you move the cattle around, the higher the conception rate, and the higher our embryo success. For instance, last spring when we put in a considerable amount of embryos we had 87% conception rate. That’s extremely high, but with our new facility we are able to accomplish this,” he says.

The new facility was scheduled to be finished before December 15th to coincide with the scheduled date to put fresh embryos in. “By doing fresh embryos instead of frozen embryos we have better success rates. Before, we had to haul the cattle over to our embryologist, so having our own facility improves many aspects of production,” Thomas explains.

There are currently more than 200 cows on the farm. “We also have 80 acres of pasture, with various paddocks. When we are calving, we bring all the cows down here to the farm and have them split into groups as to when we put the embryos in. The first group for 2016 is due to calve January 30th. We’ll have those cows in a section right up close to the barn so we can bring them right inside when they go into labor and be able to take care of them,” he says.

The new feeding facility was designed to allow the mixer wagon to drive through and deliver the feed. This allows the team to pay attention to proper nutrition. They work with two different nutritionists, making sure the cattle are fed exactly the right diet.

“We raise our own cattle, from birth to harvest,” says Jack. “We see the results at harvest. We talk to new producers about genetics, and the different kinds of mixes that might perform best, and we can refer back to the actual diet, production, and history we have with that young bull they are going to

purchase. We know how that bull's sire performed and how the mother performed. When we speak to producers, it's all backed by facts, and we think that is important," he says.

"We have carcass data on every animal that we've ever slaughtered," says Thomas. "We can go back years, on that, to see which genetics and what percentage of that bull's calves are going to grade Prime, etc. If you miss even one of the important steps, your percentages fall dramatically. It starts at day one, with each calf," he says.

"Our feeding facility allows us to have a fulltime herdsman like Thomas. He can look at every animal that is being fed, on a daily basis. He also has the ability on a weekly basis to run that animal through an evaluation. He can look at the weight, amount of feed that animal is eating, etc," says Jack. The big advantage to this facility is how it gives the ability to micromanage each individual animal, rather than looking at the whole pen and pen averages. The design of this facility is geared toward perfect function.

"The micromanaging we do, per head, is what makes a difference. Most feed yards just look at the whole pen. I can sort the cattle to where I can really narrow this down to each individual animal. This is how we are seeing all the difference. We are not a commercial producer. We are a ranch, and we can give the best care possible to these animals from birth to harvest, Jack explains.

"Everything we talk about – the environment, the handling, the feed – affects this meat. That's one thing we all agree on. So we have tried to eliminate as much of the stress as we can, from these animals, so we can produce the highest quality meat. This facility was built for one purpose – to raise Wagyu cattle."

Advantages Of The Facility

Dr. Casey Barten, Bluestem Embryo Transfer Center (Abilene, Kansas) worked the first cattle through the new facility a couple weeks before Christmas. "The flow was perfect. The gentleman who did the corral design and installation (Yachel Benedick) is top notch; you won't find anybody who will do a better job than he did. The cattle moved through it beautifully. We were able to do everything very efficiently and the cattle were calm going through," he says. "The Gypsum Valley team worked on this facility for a long time, and spent quite a lot of money doing it, but it worked very well."

Dr. Barten is a general practitioner as well as doing a lot of embryo transfer work. "I do their general cattle work as well as their repro work. We've been doing embryo transfers for them since 2008, from the very first handful of Wagyu cattle they bought, and we're now working with them quite extensively," he says.

"This facility was the next step they needed to take. With the potential recipients that they have, they wanted to be able to maximize the number of embryos they could put in, and put in fresh. It boils down to economics; if a person has 100 embryos to put in, and can do most of them fresh instead of frozen, you can expect at least a 10% increase in pregnancy rate with the fresh versus frozen. If you put in 100 and can get 10 to 15 more calves, this will soon pay for the facility," says Barten.

"On top of that, this saves the embryologist's freeze fee. Whatever pencils out best for the client is what I look for," he says. He does more cows each year for Gypsum Valley Wagyu, and with this new facility, pens and sorting systems, it's much easier.

"There's an office area where we can bring in all our equipment. We can roll in there and flush cows, transfer a large number of eggs, and have the ability to freeze the extra ones. One of the "good" problems we had the last time we were there: the cows flushed so well that we were actually able to bank a large number of eggs as well. I have really enjoyed working with this crew, from the very beginning, to where we've come now—being able to do some sizeable ET jobs and projects. It's been exciting and a lot of fun as we've grown together. I look forward to the future," he says.

The concept of doing more fresh embryos on farm is an idea that's been around a long time, but for this Wagyu operation it was the next step, to harness this technology and really make it work. "We've come a long ways in terms of the number of progeny we've been able to produce through embryo transfer together," says Barten.

Yachel Benedick (Hold'Em Fence Company, in Council Grove, Kansas) was the builder for this project. "They put a lot of time and effort in creating a low-stress working facility and a lot of thought was put into this for making it a calm, quiet environment for embryo work. We put in a Bud Box and a double alley, as well as an entire feedlot/backgrounding facility. The main focus is on low stress handling," he says.

Most of the facility is indoors—including the 6 calving pens—but the feeding area is outside. "This is a processing facility that was built more for embryo transfer than a processing facility. The chute is very quiet, and it's the only piece of equipment they did not get from us. Everything else is from Hold'Em Fence," says Benedick.

"The work was done in two phases. We built all the outdoor part a year and a half ago, in July 2014. The processing facility was just finished in December 2015. It is now a great place to work cattle!"

[more information can be gleaned from their website: www.gvwagyu.com]