

Value-added Agricultural Success Story

Donnell Century Farm

This story is one of a special series of value-added agricultural enterprise successes in Tennessee. The entrepreneurs featured have worked with specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture in different ways to achieve various levels of start-up, sustainable and long-term enterprise success. I hope their stories will be interesting, informative and inspiring.

Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture



Andrew Donnell and his mother, Rose Ann, take a break at the Jackson Farmers Market.

The Donnell family settled in Madison County, Tennessee, in 1835. Currently, the Century Farm is owned and operated by Billy and Rose Ann Donnell and their son Andrew, who's the sixth generation of Donnells to farm the land. The family raises row crops like cotton, corn, soybeans and hay, as well as registered Angus cattle on more than 1,000 acres.

In 2002, after graduating from UT Martin with a B.S. degree in animal science, Andrew decided to return to the farm so he could spend more time with his young family and earn a living off the land he loves. He immediately began looking at options to increase total farm income. "I started thinking about what we already grow that people could buy and take home with them," says Andrew. "Row crops weren't an option, and I didn't really want to start a new crop." The Donnells had been selling beef in halves and quarter sides to friends and family for several years, but Andrew thought there was potential to reach a larger market.

His mother, Rose Ann, had already established an agritourism attraction on their farm. The "AGademics" program offers students a chance to explore in an outdoor "laboratory" by performing hands-on activities that allow them to learn about agriculture.

The Donnells wanted to capitalize on the growing awareness of the Donnell family name, so Andrew researched direct marketing opportunities for meat, relying heavily on Internet searches and personal discussions with other producers who retail beef. He also worked closely with the Center for Profitable Agriculture (CPA) to launch his own direct marketing venture.

Many of the ideas Andrew has pursued have been adapted from an acquaintance in Maryland, who moves his product through grocery stores. "It's amazing how willing people are to share their experiences. I've had very open discussions and been able to tweak it to make fit our situation."



After the initial legwork was done, Andrew had to convince his family it was worth the effort and investment. "Once my father was on-board, I felt confident and began moving forward."

Andrew's next areas of concentration were to get a cost analysis and detailed marketing specifications. In August 2007, he met with CPA marketing specialist Jennifer Dutton for advice about market analysis, feasibility and pricing strategies. "CPA is the best thing that happened to us while we were planning," says Andrew. "Jennifer looked at everything with fresh eyes and made excellent recommendations. Plus, she really helped with the rules and regulations of processing and retailing. CPA is a definite asset to farmers."



Jennifer and a graphic designer collaborated with Andrew to develop marketing materials including a USDA-approved packaging label, a brochure, price list, logo and a Website.

In March 2008, Donnell Century Farm All-Natural Angus Beef made its direct-market debut at the farmers' market in downtown Jackson, Tennessee. The market is open year-round, and the Donnells plan to sell bi-weekly from 8 a.m. to noon. They are also planning to test the waters at the Memphis farmers' market on off weeks.

John and Amanda Saffold shop at the Jackson farmers' market weekly and purchase the Donnells' beef. John says, "The flavor is better than at the supermarket, and we like the idea of supporting local farmers. We've even visited the farm and seen the animals. It has given us a level of trust in the Donnells."

Besides a presence at farmers' markets, Andrew is looking at larger scale possibilities. "I've considered marketing to grocery store chains, starting an on-farm retail market and even doing our own processing, but it takes a lot of money and energy to build a retail business," he noted. "We're starting small, but we hope to upgrade as we grow."

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The mission of the Center for Profitable Agriculture is to help farm families improve income by identifying new ways to add value to food and fiber products through processing, packaging and marketing. We focus on three areas:

- Working with families and entrepreneurs to analyze value-added agricultural enterprises;
- Implementing market development studies to determine the viability of new products;
- Conducting educational programs for Tennessee farmers and agricultural leaders.

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