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Finks win CAB Commitment to Excellence Award

Galen Fink and Lori Hagenbuch grew up on eastern Kansas farms, learning the importance of sound decisions in cattle judging, business and leadership. The couple met at Kansas State University and married in 1975. Galen spent 14 years managing the University's purebred herd while Lori headed the Kansas Angus Association.

More recently, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) honored the Finks on Sept. 13 at the brand's annual conference. They accepted the 2008 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

Fink Beef Genetics started with the purchase of a few Angus cows in 1976, keeping back heifers. They had no land of their own, but found a pasture to rent. They couldn't even afford a bull, but that wasn't the main reason they built up with only artificial insemination (AI).

"We had about 20 cows in the mid-1980s," Galen recalls. Purchasing 30 heifers from Montana's Hyline Angus in 1987 provided a boost to complete the foundation. They spread it by renting space in their customers' cows, implanting embryos since 1988.

The Fink type of cow "rejected the 1970s and '80s model and went for more volume and muscling," Galen says. "That set us up for the 1990s." The couple left other jobs, and daughter Megan was born in 1990 to help mark the new era.

"If we were ever going to make it on our own, that was the time," Lori says.

They held a private-treaty production sale with 25 bulls that fall. After embryo transfer with customers, the Finks began keeping some of their cows in customer herds. "We owned the cows, made the breeding decisions and bought the calves back," Galen says.

From the start, the couple had put every available dollar into their herd, to the exclusion of buying land or fancy equipment. "That's what you do when you don't have money," Galen says. "We had to get our herd built up some way.

"A lot of nights, we wondered where the money was going to come from," he says, but the bulls worked for people, who comprised a kind of support network. "If we thought about any changes, we talked with our customers and they kept us on track."

The first female sales were “really good,” Galen says. That helped in the cattle-cycle crash of the mid-1990s. In fact, Finks found a way to diversify into a whole new arena.

Their Little Apple Brewing Company restaurant in Manhattan, Kan., opened in 1994. The next year Chef Russ Loub joined what has been a Kansas Beef Council and *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand award-winning restaurant ever since.

Since adding CAB steak houses in Council Grove and Junction City, Kan., Lori says, “We’ve tried to do our part from conception to consumption, developing supply and opening new markets for CAB in Kansas.”

On the cattle side, the Finks have included carcass traits since 1990, “without chasing it,” Galen says. “Don’t get me wrong, I think you should add all the marbling you can without losing anything else. But you should be sure. It’s not a problem with commercial guys; most of them could probably pay more attention to marbling,” he adds.

Knowing the prevalence of crossbreeding, and to avoid selecting for ever-larger Angus, the Finks added Charolais genetics in 1999. In that breed, they stressed marbling more because it was a relative weakness.

“There will come a time when they won’t want cattle so big, but if they want them now, they can terminal cross,” Galen says.

Whatever their customers’ strategy, the Finks will help them sell. A recent sale catalog notes a half-dozen alliances and information on nine feedlots. Fink Influence calf and female sales through local and national auction companies provide other options. Steers garner premiums of up to \$10 per hundredweight (cwt.) and \$17 per cwt. on replacement heifers.

Whether auction, private treaty or retained ownership, the extended staff offers help. Barrett Broadie is based at Ashland, Kan., and Gene Barrett at Grantville, Kan. Tommy Mann and Charles Robert Stevens take care of Southern customers from their Florida base.

Over the past 18 years, Megan has grown to be an active partner in the ranch. “She loves working with and being around cattle,” Lori observes.

Nothing can match that mutual family affection, but the Finks all love their new home and ranch headquarters. “Until two years ago, we were implanting more than 1,000 embryos and selling 600 bulls a year, all out of a 40-acre rented base,” Galen says.

Unlike the Finks, the place they bought near Randolph, Kan., had been idle for 50 years. It took a lot of work to clean up, but already shows all the signs of becoming a showplace for the functional Fink cows and their owners.

After all those years of “living poor,” Fink Beef Genetics, now among the top 20 volume seedstock producers in the U.S., has arrived. “This place has given us a sense of belonging to a community,” Lori says; “a sense of home.”

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