

3 Sisters Beef is a family effort

By MARGARETT WATERBURY
For the Capital Press

3 Sisters Beef, a 600-acre family farm and ranch on Whidbey Island, Wash., has seen its fair share of change over the last five generations.

But every time the Muzzall family faced a challenge, they adapted, and today they're one of Western Washington's most prominent direct-market 100 percent grass-fed beef producers.

Not long ago, 3 Sisters was primarily a dairy farm.

"We were milking 200 cows when we got out," explains co-owner Ron Muzzall. "But we really felt the ups and downs of the dairy business. So we started looking for ways to mitigate that commodity price swing. About 15 years ago, we started growing the beef cattle operation."

By 2006, the Muzzalls had exited dairy altogether. While beef is their biggest business — their current herd is about 400 mother cows. They also raise hogs, lambs and fryers to keep the farm diversified.



Courtesy of 3 Sisters Beef
Jennifer Muzzall carries a calf on the farm she co-manages with her parents and sisters.

They sell most of their beef directly to consumers, but also operate an onsite market and sell to local grocery stores and restaurants.

Once a rural community, Whidbey Island is rapidly urbanizing, and the ranch is adapting to more traffic, more neighbors and a different kind of clientele.

Initially, that pressure was



Courtesy of Lauren Tyner
Sisters Jessica, Jennifer, and Roshel each own a share of the family business, a 600-acre cattle ranch on Whidbey Island, Wash.

a challenge for 3 Sisters Beef. As the community became more crowded, neighbors began complaining about the truck traffic and early morning noise that comes with running a dairy.

After switching from dairy to beef and beginning direct marketing, those challenges from the community vanished. "Those obstacles are now our customer base," Ron says. "We do a lot of marketing within the community. Every five years, we have an open house, and last year we had 2,500 people show

up. We get a ton of vacationers, weekenders and seasonal people, so we've become an avenue for them to taste part of the community in their meals, and to take something home."

But all that outreach is a lot of work.

"My advice to any producer starting down the direct marketing path is this: 25 per-

cent of the work is raising the animal, 25 percent is getting it butchered, and the remaining 50 percent is marketing," Ron says. "The amount of time we spend on customer service is incredible."

Through it all, 3 Sisters Beef has remained a family enterprise: Shelly and Ron Muzzall operate the farm in partner-

ship with their three daughters: Jennifer, Jessica and Roshel.

"Each of the girls owns a share in the business," Ron says. "And having them involved has been a real asset."

One of the first projects the younger generation started was marketing the business online.

"Social media is a huge asset to farms," Jennifer says. "When I got back to the farm, there was no social media. Now, we have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs and a website. The consumer wants that story and the connection with their food."

Social media also gives 3 Sisters Beef a chance to tell their story, and Ron says it resonates.

"People really like to get involved with that team effort. We have three millennials willing to work, to sacrifice, to look at the future. That isn't a very common thing."

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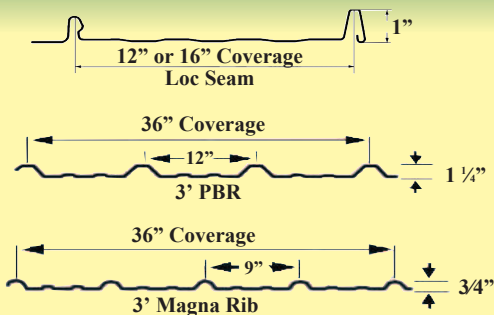
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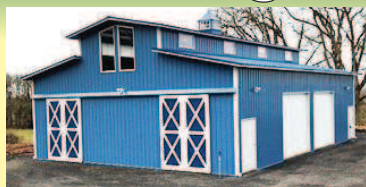
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