
*A child said, What is the grass, fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.*

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven. . . .

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

FARMING GRASS

Big Bluff Ranch

BY CANDACE BYRNE



In the middle of Big Bluff Ranch, Tyler Dawley peels his canvas hat from his head and tosses it like a frisbee. “I always wanted to do this,” he says. He’s bet me that within a foot or two of wherever his hat lands, even in the month of February, he’ll be able to find a California native grass. Native perennial grasses blanketed California 100 or 120 years ago, he’s told me, but droughts, overgrazing, and the introduction of the invasive orchard grass, a native European species, have diminished the California natives.

Sure enough, a short tuft of bunch grass sprouts from the ground at the rim of his hat. He grabs needle-nosed pliers from his truck and gently pries up the tuft, under which, as he wants to show me, is a layer of light, composted soil atop an under-layer of harder dirt. This composted soil is the reason the native grass grows, the proof of Dawley’s success as a grass farmer.

People in Redding, Red Bluff, and Chico know the Dawleys from their booths at those towns’ Farmers’ Markets and from Chico Natural Foods, where they sell Big Bluff Ranch’s grass-fed, grass-finished beef.

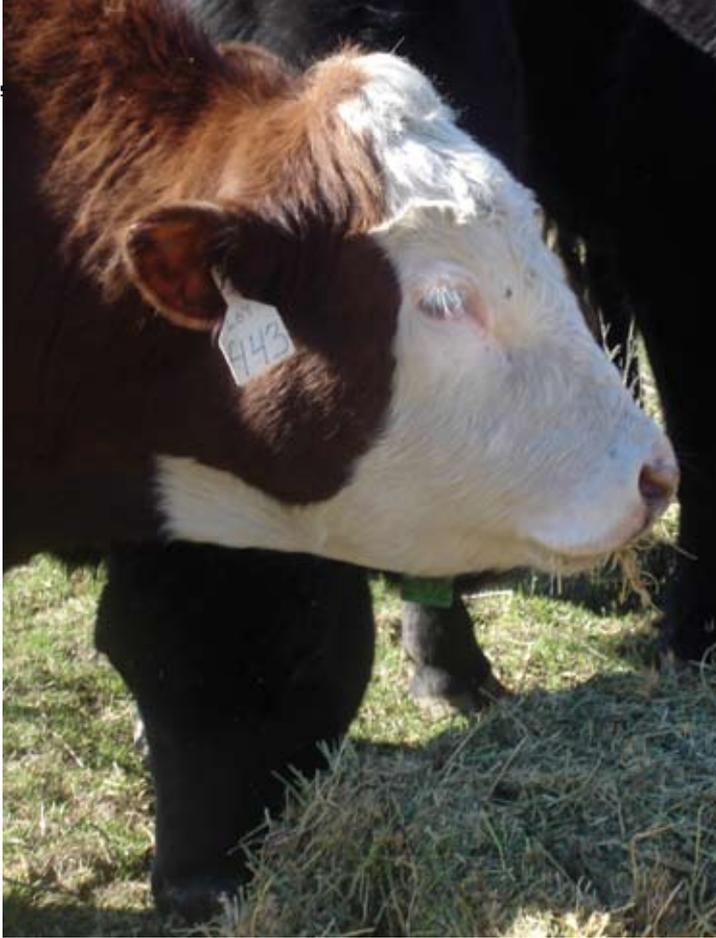
But Tyler thinks of himself as a grass farmer.

His vocation grew out of the family’s life on the ranch. Tyler’s parents, Frank and Vickie Dawley, came to Big Bluff Ranch to spend the summer of 1976 and never left. Dawley’s grandparents had bought the ranch in 1960, and his parents’ arrival soon signaled a shift. The Dawleys began conscious work to care for the land. They realized that bigger cows required more groceries—that is, more feed—and so they wanted smaller cows who wouldn’t devour the grasses. They realized that the native perennials required grazing plus a rest period to maximize their growth, and so they began to fence the land in order to move the cows—grazing, then rest.

“High intensity, short duration” characterizes this approach to grazing. Cows, according to Tyler, “eat with five mouths: the one through which they ingest and also their four feet.” Tyler explains how, if one cow grazes 100 acres, the cow moves through gently, on its heels or flat-footed, compacting the earth. But if 100 cows graze one acre, they lean forward a bit and move on their toes, alert to other animals in proximity, their hooves working more as a plow tilling a seed bed. In high intensity grazing, the different animals’ hooves moving through the pastures are like so many tractor passes. “Cowdozers,” Tyler calls them. High intensity, short duration grazing also distributes manure more uniformly. The combination of plowing and fertilizing readies the soil to receive seeds of the native perennial grasses the Dawleys grow.

In addition, a number of ungulates—hoofed animals—move through the Dawleys’ land. They eat different growth, Tyler explains. “Cows are the bulk foragers”—they eat the bulk of the grass. Sheep eat “the higher quality dicots”—the weeds. Goats eat the brush so it doesn’t overtake the grasses. The native grasses grow because of the way these ungulates prepare the soil and control the competition.

The health of the ranchland is evident in more than the native grasses now found within a foot or two of a toss of Tyler’s hat. As Tyler crosses a creek bed, he tells me he remembers summers as a kid, swimming in the then narrow creek. He also remembers the late, hotter summer days when the creek bed dried and



Cows at Big Bluff Ranch feed on a rare bale of hay in late winter's dry weather"

swimming ended.

Now, thanks to that same tending of the grasses, in the last five years the riparian area around the creek hosts a wash of oak seedlings, which have followed growth of first mulefat, then willows, then cottonwood thickets, each demonstrating the availability of more and more water. This succession of plants has emerged over the years as the native grasses have recovered, sending their roots into the ground around the old creek bed, loosening the soil, turning the area into a sponge, wherein interlocking roots hold water, and thus the plants can emerge. This sponginess has also altered the narrow, seasonal running of the creek in Tyler's childhood. Not only does the stream now run wider and year round. A family of beavers has traveled miles to inhabit it, probably from the Sacramento River over twenty miles away, and the creek's water provides the ranch's hydroelectric power.

Thanks to this power, the energy provided by a small windmill, and the greater amount of energy collected by a mass of solar panels, Big Bluff Ranch operates off the grid. It seems consistent that they refer to the cows as "photosynthetic energy storage" while at the same time themselves relying on storage of solar energy. The Dawleys believe the fewer petroleum inputs to their operation, the greater the health of their land.

The same care Tyler takes with the ranchland, he takes with the cows. He invokes a scene from old westerns to describe how *not* to relate to cows: bellowing animals stampeding with cow-

boys on horses whistling and driving them from behind—the cowboy as predator and the cows as prey. On Big Bluff Ranch, no horses, no cowboy roundups, instead, to move the cows after their short duration of high intensity grazing, Tyler uses a method credited to Bud Williams (www.stockmanship.com), wherein he reads the cows, walking gently around them, avoiding their blind spot and flight zone, applying pressure to head them in the direction they want to go, then releasing/relieving the pressure as soon as they begin to move. Through this gentle herding both the cows and Tyler just meander to greener pastures. The cows' association of this reward with their handler must be what allows me to walk with Tyler right up to the animals, who calmly eat around us as he explains the difference between grass-fed and grass-finished beef.

The Dawleys became aware of consumer interest in grass-fed beef ten years ago. Often, though, grass-fed beef is not also grass-finished. It might be "finished" on grain, or it might not be "finished" at all. In "finishing," the cow gains 1.5-2 pounds a day and takes on a marbling of fat in the muscle, desirable since it is fat that carries flavor.

Tyler talks me through his process of finding the cow "finished": how his eye and the pressure of his fingers read the fat in the tail bone area, along the backbone, and on the 13th rib, the location of the rib eye and t-bone cuts. Finishing on grass, rather than the hotter grain, yields an animal with fat in the muscle, not mostly around the outside of the carcass, fat which, in any event, would all be trimmed away after harvesting the animal.

In harvesting, too, Tyler evinces care. The Dawleys utilize either Chris Johansen, a butcher in Orland who processes up to twenty head a day—compared to a large feedlot's thousands/day—or Tom Balls, who is licensed to harvest the animals right on Big Bluff Ranch. Tyler calls them "artisan butchers," because of the care they take in harvesting and dry-aging the meat.

Most grocery store meat is wet-aged—that is, it is cut and wrapped immediately after the animal is harvested, then packaged under nitrogen into a Styrofoam tray covered with a cushy pad to absorb excess water. In purchasing the meat, consumers also purchase the water that has leached into the cushion, and the meat has been just five to ten days from harvest to table. In dry aging, the meat hangs for two to three weeks, and excess water slowly evaporates, concentrating the flavor in the meat. Johansen and Balls both advise the Dawleys on the optimum time to hang their meat, depending on its fat content.

Tyler says it has taken Big Bluff Ranch ten years to feel confident that their meat provides "a good eating experience." Bradley Shackleford, a regular customer of Big Bluff Ranch's grass-finished beef, wholeheartedly agrees. Shackleford found the Dawleys at the Redding Farmers' Market when his son developed an intolerance to gluten—the Shacklefords were vegans at the time—and a doctor friend recommended the boy

try a meat and vegetable diet for a time. In support, the whole family embraced this shift. “The new diet—and fabulous meat,” says Shackleford, “improved our health, and we have not looked back.” The Shackleford family attended the May 2006 Slow Food Festival at Big Bluff Ranch and saw first-hand “the care they take with their animals and their land. One of the reasons the meat tastes so darn good is that the animals live in an entirely stress-free environment, feeding on what nature provides and what the Dawleys nurture.”

What the Dawleys nurture is not just grass-finished meat. Tyler speaks of their meat customers “closing the circle” when they purchase the meat. “You can taste everything I’ve been talking about in the meat,” Tyler says—the finished beef and the artisan butchers’ directions for dry aging it; the gentle, human handling that moves the cows to new pasture; the water, wind and solar power that keeps the farm off the grid; the native oak and beavers returned to the riparian area and creek; the ungulates whose different hooves and diets ready the ranchland for native perennials through the Dawleys’ high intensity, short duration grazing; and the bunch grass within a hat’s throw.

Indeed, within the meat is the disposition of this grass farmer.

Big Bluff Ranch Grass Finished Beef is available at Chico and Redding Saturday Farmers’ Markets, at Chico Natural Foods, and through the ranch website www.bigbluffranch.com

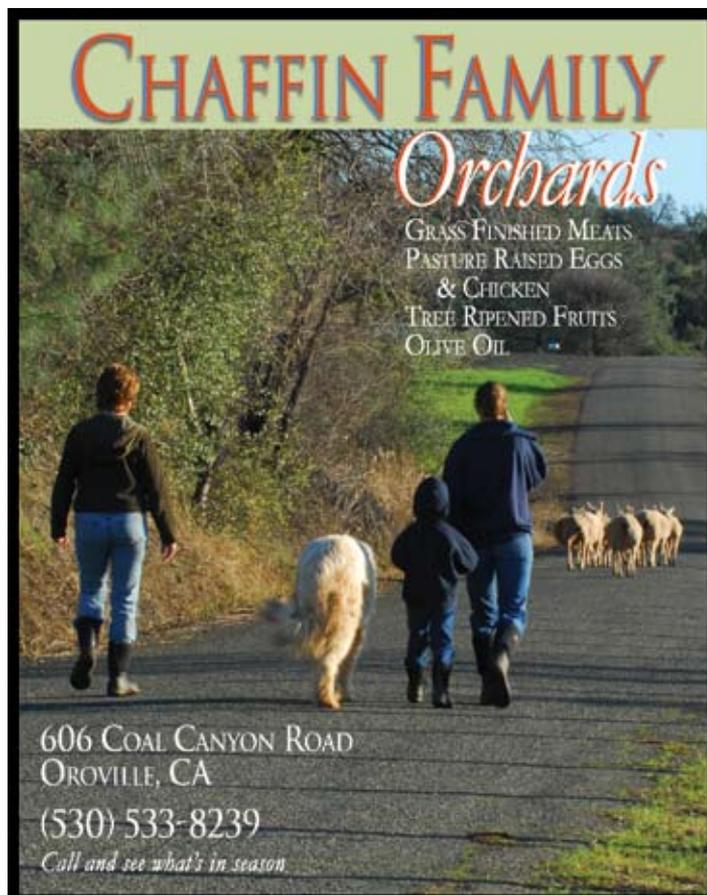


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