

Piedmontese Is Choice Breed For Levan Family

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Charlois breed that the Levans also raise on their Berks County farm.

The Levans were looking for a niche market that would keep them from being at the mercy of low market prices. Piedmontese allows them to get a premium.

They sell finished beef to the Ohio Better Beef and to Georgetown Farms, who provide beef to the organic, no hormone market.

The Levans are pleased with the prices paid by the two companies. The pay rate is a bit different, but averages out to about the same amount. Georgetown Farms pays top price plus 12 percent live weight. Ohio pays 15 percent over top market price for hanging weight.

"The nice thing is that we don't need to pay shipping," Shirley said. The cattle are loaded on a truck at the Leesport Auction located within a few miles of the Levans.

For the past 15 years, the Levan's have lived on a Hamburg farm where they raise 60 head of beef and all the calves to finishing. They farm in partnership with Paul's parents. In addition to the 60-acres on the farm, they rent 250 acres.

Justin, 18; Cathy, 15; and Jason, 12, share duties on the farm. Justin takes care of most of the field work and manure removal since his father has an off-the-farm job.

According to Shirley the Piedmontese breed was imported to the U.S. within the past 10 years. Piedmontese cattle originate from Italy where it is the most popular breed.

Shirley said, "Piedmontese produce extra lean meat with more high quality cuts than any other breed. Bone structure is finer, hinds weigh less, and dress out much better."

Case in point is a recent heifer that a group judged would give 12 ribeyes. It dressed out to 16.9-inch ribeyes with .3 backfat.

Even hanging on the rail, doesn't do justice to the Piedmontese in many cases.

"On the rail, the meat looks similar to deer meat because it is lean, but it has a real beefy taste," Shirley said.

To the untrained eye, the meat looks more like a bull carcass because of the double muscling, and the meat is expected to be tough because it has no marbling. In actuality it's pure beef that is amazingly tender and takes only half the time to cook as an ordinary cut of meat.

Most lean beef produced sacrifices flavor and tenderness because fat cover and marbling has been associated with good flavoring. Piedmontese have no marbling and minimal fat cover but provide tender, juicy beef flavor. All this, according to Shirley, is due to genetics.

About half the herd is Charolais, but the Levans prefer the Piedmontese both for taste and for handling.

"Piedmontese are very docile," Shirley said. "Even a half blood will tone down the whole temperament of a Charolais."

There is a drawback to raising Piedmontese. They grow a bit slower than the average calf, because they put on more muscle. The Levans have had some problems with first time calving of half blood heifers, but no trouble with full blood.

Although the cattle have access to two barns, they remain in the

pasture except for the most fierce storms.

"They seem to know the best place for their health is outside," Shirley said. "We have no respiratory problems — or any health problems — with them."

Because the cattle spend their time in the pasture with little exposure to human contact, they are more aggressive and protective of little ones.

The Levans wanted to see what a bunch of really good Piedmontese cattle looked like in the show ring so they decided to attend the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE), held November 15. They took along two heifers to show.

Cathy said, "I am so accustomed to being placed at the bottom that when the judge motioned me to the top, I couldn't believe it."

After placing first in her class, Cathy went on to capture the reserve junior heifer over all with her heifer Cheyenne.

The heifer is considered outstanding for very thick muscling and correct underpinning. The Levans said they were puzzled by the terminology until underpinning was explained as "how she stood on four corners."

The Levans plan to flush for embryos since several people at the NAILE requested it.

The taste of victory has been



sweet to Cathy who now plans to show at the Ohio Beef Expo in March.

The Levans have their own Piedmontese bull but have also used imported Italian semen on cows for flushing. The five embryos they purchased resulted in only two pregnancies so the Levans are inclined to resort to using their own bull to build up the herd.

Cathy and Jason show sheep and hogs at fairs. In the Levan home ribbons are strung across the top of both sides of the large doorway between the living room and kitchen. The ribbons and trophies were accumulated from Kempton, Schwenksville, Reading, Oley, and Kutztown Fairs.

"I tell them they can only have the ribbons and trophies from one year down here; otherwise they go upstairs," Shirley said. "There are just too many to display."

In addition to Justin and Jason having won champion market lambs at local fairs, Jason captured

the champion project market lamb banner. In this competition, scores are based not only on a lamb's correctness, but the exhibitors are tested on showmanship and general knowledge such as identifying feed and equipment, animal health, and general management skills.

Although they live in the Hamburg School District, the kids attend Tulpenhocken for the ag program.

"Things are changing," Shirley said. "When I was in school about 75 percent of the students either lived on the farm or their grandparents did. But in my son's class, he was the only one out of 200 students working on a farm."

Cathy and Jason will show sheep and hogs at the state Farm Show. Cathy also is raising a Simmental in order to be more competitive in area show rings. Although she has achieved champion showman status for steers and sheep, she said that it has been difficult in fitting because Piedmontese have

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