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A hulking, gray or whitish cow with a hump on its back, elongated ears and slightly protruding ribs is a thing of beauty to Charles Waller.

Waller, a Dade City lawyer and rancher, owns 250 head of cattle, but he prizes the ones that show at least one of those physical characteristics, typical of Brahman cows.

Brahman crossbreeds are heat-hearty cattle, he said. And they produce more and stronger calves, despite their homely appearance.

“When you’re riding down a road and you see the pretty black Angus or a red Santa Gertrudis lying under the shade, the Brahman will be out there in the sun eating grass,” he said.

“A lot of the purebred or continental breeds are going to be more pleasant for a city slicker to look at . . . but that Brahman is going to have some ribs showing, even when it’s in good shape.”

Ribs plus muscle equal leaner beef, not good looks. And leaner beef leads to plumper profits for Florida’s ranchers.

The beef industry, after years of losing market share to white meat and fish, is finally regaining its footing. By working overtime to persuade nutrition experts and consumers that red meat isn’t all that bad, it has halted the plunging demand for beef.

But consumers are starting to return at a time when the beef industry is finding itself short on cows. That means higher prices for red meat versus chicken, pork or turkey, and a stunted recovery for beef producers like Waller.

The answer: produce leaner beef and you can get away with a premium price, the beef industry tells ranchers. Not only are McDonald’s restaurants selling lean versions of their burgers, but supermarket chains throughout the country are testing lean beef in their meat case. Lean times for cattle ranchers

The push for leaner meat “has certainly filtered down to the ranchers,” Waller said. “We feel it in our pocketbook every fall, when we take the cattle over to the market. If you’ve got the wrong breed it’s going to cost several pennies per pound.”

Florida’s farmers have few pennies to spare.

During the early 1980s, ranchers faced weak prices and a flood of cows at livestock markets.

Cattlemen had overproduced years before, and millions of dairy farmers had been paid by the U.S. government to reduce their herds to stabilize milk prices. To make matters worse, a federal disease eradication program slaughtered millions more cows.

In one year, about 4 percent of Florida’s 17,000 herds of cattle were destroyed and the meat (deemed safe for humans) put on the market, said Bob Blankenship, a spokesman for the Florida Department of Agriculture.

That extra beef hit supermarkets about the time that health-conscious consumers began shunning red meat because of its high cholesterol and fat content. Americans reduced their average intake of red meat from 122 pounds a year to 63.5 pounds during the 1980s, according to meat industry estimates.

Weighed down with excess cattle, a number of small ranches in Florida went out of business, along with some large meat-packing houses and several of the state’s few feedlots. (Feedlots fatten cattle, usually calves, before slaughter.)

“In the 1980s we had a tough situation,” said Bill Miller, a rancher and editor of Beef Today magazine in Prole, Iowa.

“Lots of people couldn’t keep up with their debt and had to sell out. Some of those people with jobs in town held onto their jobs to support their cow habit.” Small operators like Waller were the most endangered. Federal statisticians say the number of ranches with 100 head of cattle or less are declining in number.

“If anything there’s been an increase in the number of inventory held by large operations,” said Aubrey Bordelon, a statistician at the Florida Agriculture Statistics Service in Orlando.

The Mormon Church is the second-largest cattle-raising operation in the nation, behind King Ranch Inc. in Houston, and is the largest in Florida; its Deseret Ranches in Orlando raised 34,000 head last year, according to Beef Today. Lykes Brothers Inc. is the nation’s fourth-largest ranch owner and second-largest in Florida, with nearly 17,000 head of cattle as of 1990.

In total, Florida has 18,000 ranches with 1.9-million head of cattle. But 89 percent of those ranches are small ranches, with less than 100 head of cattle.

Most of Florida’s ranches are called cow-calf operations because they produce calves and send them off to feedlots out West.

Feedlots fatten the cattle on grains before slaughter,

then meat packers or processors buy the carcasses, packaging it fresh or processing it into foods such as sausage and hamburger.

During the mid-1980s meat packers were pinched, especially after fast-food chains like McDonald’s and Wendy’s began peddling chicken and fish sandwiches as furiously as they did burgers.

“We’re having a hard time staying alive,” said Eddie Ondick, owner of Hi Flavor Meats, a meat processor in Oviedo, north of Orlando.

“What is saving us is there aren’t as many people in the business as there used to be. But we’re not making the profit we used to.” Seeking credibility

At first the beef industry vainly tried to discredit nutrition reports that denigrated beef. But “there was too much information coming out and no way that our message could be believed,” said Thomas J. McDermott, spokesman for the National Beef Council. Seeking more credibility, the industry recruited actors James Garner and Cybill Shepherd for its “Real Food for Real People” TV campaign. Shepherd’s fondness for beef was briefly disputed in magazine articles, but her commercials proved successful in changing some consumers’ disaffection for beef, McDermott said.

This year consumers are expected to spend \$49.1-billion on beef, up from \$43-million five years ago, and more than they spend on poultry or pork. Beef’s market share has stopped shrinking, McDermott said, but no one is sure for how long.

A major threat to beef’s resurgence is supply. It will be three years before the weakened cattle industry can build up its herds to meet today’s demand, said Miller of Beef Today.

“We have the oldest cow herd in 30 years,” he said.

Ranchers also are getting older. The average subscriber to Beef Today is 55 years old or older, Miller said.

“The 1980s culled a lot of (beef) producers and culled a lot of their kids, too,” he said.

The nation’s inventory of 99.4-million head of cattle is among the smallest inventories in cattle history. Florida’s 1.9-million head is the lowest since 1967, Blankenship said.

No wonder ranchers are roping in high prices for cattle at livestock markets. A calf, weighing in at 350 to 450 pounds, can command 98 cents a pound, versus 59 cents a pound in the mid-1980s, said Bordelon in Orlando. Breeding cows, destined to live 11 or 12 years if they bear a cow every year, can fetch \$800 to \$1,500 each.

Those higher prices can’t be passed onto consumers automatically.

“The industry has cut (cow) numbers so much it has forced the retail price of beef up,” Miller said.

“But it’s going to come back to haunt us. The industry has gotten cow numbers down so low, it will not be able to supply the product at prices competitive with poultry.” Lean beef finds calling

The first to be squeezed between the high price for cattle and consumers’ resistance are feedlots. Today only one or two feedlots in Florida survive, feeding 5,000 head of cattle, compared with five years ago when six feedlots fed 100,000 head, Blankenship said. Like the feedlots, the meat packing industry is facing trimmed profits.

“I’m not coping too damn well,” said Thomas Bryan, plant manager at Central Packing Co. Inc. in Center Hill in Sumter County. His plant can’t hope for much profit per carcass, so it has to do a large number - about 800 to 900 a week - to break even, he said.

“I either buy some cattle and fill customers’ orders or these customers discontinue being regular customers,” he said.

Processors and meat packers are urging ranchers to raise more lean beef. Philip Fletcher, president of ConAgra Inc., told attendees at a National Cattlemen’s Association meeting that they “need to think about providing leaner beef, adding shelf life, reducing preparation time and adding flavors.”

Kraft Food Services, another major processor, already has begun test-marketing a low-fat ground beef. Officials at several large grocery chains have said they are interested in testing leaner beef, said Miller of Beef Today.

McDonald’s Corp. recently announced it will sell the McLean Deluxe, a 91-percent fat-free burger, in all its restaurants nationwide.

“We were just startled in all of our test markets at how quickly they warmed up to the product,” said Ed Rensi, McDonald’s president, in a statement.

The meat industry also is ebullient over the McLean burger. The Beef Council helped develop it and recently the council circulated press releases claiming that the burger creates a “halo effect” for the industry. “People who may have cut back on our product are going to be brought back in via things like low-fat ground beef,” McDermott said.