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Dan Coughlin, right, talks with Todd Churchill at Thousand Hills Cattle Co. Coughlin joined the consortium of farmers who now raise grass-fed cows.

Parchment boosts braising power

Winter always puts us in a mood to braise; one of our favorite ways to do it is with a second lid of parchment paper placed directly on top what's being braised. It locks in the moisture, leaving an extra-moist, rich-tasting dinner. Tear out a square of parchment paper the approximate width of your braising pot and press it down so it's just touching the contents of the pot. If some of the paper sticks out over the rim of the pot, that's OK.

Cover with the pot's lid and you're ready to braise. Not only do you create a tighter seal, but you also concentrate the braising juices by reducing the headroom above the food. What's more, the parchment paper alters the cycle of evaporation and condensation within the pot. It forces moisture that normally condenses on the underside of the lid and runs back down the sides of the pot to drip back down directly into the food, creating a sort of self-basting mechanism.

Parchment paper and waxed paper are not the same. Waxed paper is paraffin-coated tissue paper; the wax melts at low temperatures, the paper smokes and chars, and liquid breaks it down easily. The surface of parchment paper, on the other hand, is hard, smooth and impermeable, so it doesn't soak up grease or moisture. Many manufacturers also apply a silicone coating, making the paper entirely nonstick. **FOOD NETWORK KITCHENS**

Have you herd? Grass-fed beef is a lean, tasty alternative

◀ BEEF FROM T1

"Stewardship and sustainability are the bedrocks of our business model," said Churchill. "All of our decisions are run through that filter."

Just how beneficial is the grass-fed movement for the environment? When farmer Dan Coughlin signed on with Thousand Hills in 2004, he converted 600 acres from tilled crops to clover, rye, brome, Timothy and a half-dozen other grasses. He estimates that erosion on the deeply rolling hills of his Rice County farm has fallen from 6,000 to 1,000 pounds of topsoil per year. The newfound biodiversity has other benefits, too. "I see so many different birds that I need to carry a bird book with me," he said. "And we have more hawks than ever, because the mice are doing better now."

Benefits not just economic

Although he talks about genetics, Churchill doesn't mean "genetically modified." His model steps back a half-century and targets specific British breeds — red and black Angus, Herefords and Black Gal-laws — that fell out of favor in the 1960s when they didn't take to the alien diets and unnatural surroundings of the feedlot.

This premium product also commands a premium price, about 35 percent more than conventionally raised beef. But for farmers, the economic benefits are not only at the cash register. Remove the costs of raising grain — no annual seed or chemicals, no \$250,000 harvester in the pole barn — and

WHERE TO BUY

Thousand Hills beef is available at all Kowalski's Markets, all Twin Cities natural foods co-ops, Village Market in Prior Lake, Clancey's Meats & Fish in Minneapolis, Fresh & Natural Foods in Shoreview and Hudson, Wis., and on-line through Simon Delivers and www.thousandhillscattleco.com. Some area restaurants that serve Thousand Hills beef include the Nicollet Island Inn, Broders' Pasta Bar, Restaurant Alma and Cafe Twenty Eight in Minneapolis and the Bayport Cookery in Bayport.

the economics of grazing really start to make sense. It's no wonder that in just three years, the business has grown to include 20 farms in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Nebraska, providing beef and beef products (frozen sloppy Joes and meatballs, shredded brisket) to 50 stores and restaurants in the Twin Cities, Rochester, Minn., and Eau Claire, Wis. Churchill is looking into adding grass-fed lamb, pastured pork and pure-pasture poultry. "Our goal is to supply healthy animal proteins to the Twin Cities market," he said.

Beef like mom used to buy

So far, the market for grass-fed beef is minuscule. Churchill estimates that for grass-fed beef to represent just 1 percent of all U.S. beef sales, his company would have to slaughter about 250,000 cattle a year; in

2006, he projects Thousand Hills will process 1,200 animals. "We have a long, long way to go," he said.

Except in the taste department. At first glance, Thousand Hills beef (which, thanks to the all-grass diet, is higher in prized omega-3 fatty acids than conventionally raised beef) doesn't meet the stereotypical ideal of what Americans consider prime beef. But don't let its lean looks fool you.

"We're so used to heavily marbled meat as the quality standard," said Mike Lorentz of Lorentz Meats in Cannon Falls, Minn., the company's processor. "But that's a bias. This is a much leaner beef, but it's remarkably tender."

Jim Kyndberg, chef/owner of the Bayport Cookery in Bayport, has been a Thousand Hills convert for a year. But he admits that his enthusiasm required an attitude adjustment in the marbling department.

"For years, I was told that marbling equaled flavor," said Kyndberg. "But have you ever chewed on fat? It doesn't taste like beef. Marbling is really for the texture. The flavor is in the meat. Just don't overcook it, that's the main thing."

Churchill said that whenever a farmer past retirement age tastes a Thousand Hills ribeye or New York strip for the first time, the reaction is entirely predictable: This is what they remember beef tasting like as a kid on their parents' farm. Kyndberg was no different.

"It reminds me of the beef my mom used to buy from near-by farmers when I was a kid," he said. "It absolutely melts in your mouth, and I was blown away by that pure flavor."

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