



(far left) Hannah Klitz starts her day. (left) Klitz packages a beef shipment out of her new store in West Point, Nebraska.

AN EARLY START

Hannah Klitz started her direct-to-consumer beef business as a college sophomore. Now she sells premium products across the U.S.

By Courtney Leeper Girgis

Cattle have always interested Hannah Klitz. She grew up raising show calves for 4-H in Colorado before moving to her parents' home state of Nebraska at age 13. There, her family established a cow herd and an embryo transfer business. Her family would implant embryos into their cows at the request of seed stock cattle producers wanting calves with specific genetic traits. They would then raise those resulting calves until weaning, when the calves would go to the original owners.

Klitz thought she wanted to be an embryologist, but soon after entering the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) as an animal science major, she realized she most enjoyed the business of cattle.

As a freshman in UNL's Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, she began learning the entrepreneurial mind-set, which Tom Field, Engler director, describes as one of "actively searching, under-



Hannah Klitz

taking a quest, taking on big challenges, finding problems that need to be solved, and doing something about them."

Klitz found a big problem during her sophomore year.

As the Nebraska Cattlewomen's Beef Ambassador, she traveled across the state talking with concerned consumers and youth about cattle-raising practices and beef. She was in a rural community with a group of third graders when one told her eggs come from cows because they are next to the milk in the grocery store.

"I realized the huge educational gap," Klitz says. "It was something I was passionate about before, but I could see there's so much need for education, for connecting producers and consumers, and putting a face to the producer. I knew I wanted to do something about it."

Education Meets Experience

Klitz returned to school and, still a sophomore, started Oak Barn Beef in 2018, offering Nebraska-raised, dry-aged beef from cattle DNA-tested for premium carcass traits, such as marbling, tenderness, and rib

eye size.

As an Engler student, Klitz received regular mentorship as she started her business out of the old 4-H cattle show barn on her parents' farm in Unadilla, Nebraska. Professors and peers talked through issues and pushed her to take new, sometimes scary steps.

While researching comparable companies across the United States, she found the Instagram account for Five Marys Farms in northern California.

"I thought, *If I want to grow my farm-to-table business, these are the people to learn from,*" Klitz recalls.

When she told her Engler mentor Dave Lambe about Five Marys, he challenged her to ask them for an internship. At first, she balked, saying they didn't offer internships. But, with his encouragement, she decided to send the California farmers a letter. To her surprise, they said yes to her request for an internship. Klitz spent the summer of 2018 on their ranch learning how to manage a farm-to-table operation, ship a perishable product, and leverage social media to grow her audience of prospective customers.

Raising Premium Beef

Klitz buys weaned calves from her parents, who have used Neogen DNA testing since 2013. She's added a second farm source with similar protocols, also in Nebraska. She buys about ▶



100 calves each year, which are finished on a corn ration.

While commercial cattle producers often want to sell pens of cattle uniform in size, Klitz's goal of selling a consistent supply of beef means she is interested in buying calves of all sizes. It's beneficial for her to have a few larger calves, ready to go to market sooner, and smaller calves that will provide beef later.

She uses low-stress animal handling techniques learned from experience and animal science coursework, considering cattle's natural fight-or-flight instincts. She takes care to stand in positions that will not spook the cattle and limits the amount of work she asks them to do — pulling a single calf at a time only if it needs to be doctored. If she does need to work cattle, she moves slowly and as stress-free as possible.

A Big Move

In 2021, Oak Barn Beef moved about 100 miles north to West Point, Nebraska, the hometown of her husband, Eric Klitz, whom she met through the Engler program.

For now, they work with Eric's parents, keeping their calves on the elder Klitzes' farm in two groups: smaller calves are bucket-fed



Eric and Hannah Klitz

daily, and larger calves are on a self-feeder. They also own a few cows with Eric's parents' herd and plan to someday build their own cow-calf operation as they watch the land market for the right opportunity.

They have been a bit busy, though. In 2022, they welcomed a daughter, Millie, and just a few months later, in January 2023, officially opened a storefront in West Point. Klitz had been preparing shipments out of a retired hog barn on her in-law's farm. She needed more space and a place to welcome customers who drove in to pick up orders.

She and Eric found an auto mechanic shop in town, and Eric brought it down to its studs and built it back up to triple their freezer space, create a more efficient distribution center, and add a customer-facing lobby with product displays.

The store is located on a main highway. In a cattle country town with a population of less than 3,500, Klitz has been surprised by the walk-in traffic, from locals to a New Yorker who stopped by on a road trip. It helps, she says, that she includes jerky, beef sticks, summer sausage, beef patties, and other value-added products in her lineup.

However, most of Oak Barn Beef's business is done online, with beef shipped

Find Klitz

Learn more about Hannah Klitz and her business at oakbarnbeef.com. Klitz has been in the beef production and sales business for five years and has consulted with other entrepreneurs for the past three. You can find her consultation services and online sales course at farm-to-table-meat-sales.teachable.com.

to every state across the country, including Alaska and Hawaii. While beef is not graded at Klitz's local butcher, she expects it would likely grade prime.

"Entrepreneurship isn't magic," Field says. "It starts with a dream, but dreams only work when we do. Hannah understands that. Her story is one of effort, work, commitment, riding the storms and tough times, surviving, being persistent, driving toward the vision, and fighting for every inch. It's the difficulty that makes all of this so special."

Step 1: Start

To other young entrepreneurs, Klitz says to just start.

"Taking those first steps is hardest because you're never going to feel ready," Klitz says, adding that it's OK to start small and you're never too young.

If you want to sell meat directly to consumers, the first step might be setting up a butchering appointment.

And expect that you will make mistakes.

"Just go in with the mind-set of, I'm learning as I go, and give yourself grace as you learn," Klitz says. **SF**