

# THE THOUGHTFUL FARMER

Nick Sergi Succeeds at His Dream of Farming

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by LISA STAMOS





• Nick Sergi grows his own hay and stores it in large bales. •

**S**OUTHERN WISCONSIN CATTLEMAN and grain farmer Nick Sergi grew up in a countryside community that was enough of an influence on him as a child that he considered the business for himself. “The idea of farming came from where I grew up, in the Elburn and St. Charles areas,” Sergi said. “We had friends whose families farmed. I grew up next to a 75-acre horse farm. I liked the farm equipment, and I always loved the country. I love the animals. I always had thought about being a farmer.”

The idea of farming was set aside, but returned when Sergi was in college at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. “I thought about grain farming, but soon learned it’s very difficult to jump into that side of the farming business. But my passion for animals brought me to the idea of raising beef cattle. I knew I could get into farming by having animals as a niche market,” he said. “That’s been a very successful business model for me.”

### A CHANGE OF COURSE

In college, Sergi switched his mindset to farming, being driven by his passion for animals and a growing interest in the business and lifestyle. He attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s short course on both small farm management and pasture management, for which he received certificates. He traveled from his college base at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater to Madison twice a week for the short courses. His degree from Whitewater is in communications with a minor in environmental science.

“The course at Madison recommended things that helped, including staying small to get traction and growing slowly,” Sergi said. There, he found two mentors who like him, did not grow up in farming families, but nonetheless, were successful in the business. “They had 30-35 years of experience

and sold to large corporations, including Oberweiss and Organic Valley. One of my mentors—known as the Grazing Guru—is the poster child for proper organic farming, and his farm, considered an industry standard, is often visited,” he said.

One of the strategies that Sergi used to narrow down his farming options was to find farms through his networking efforts, ones that he could visit. He also worked on several farms during college including horse, dairy, and vegetable farms. One of his mentors from the Madison program ran a 100-percent grass-fed and 100-percent organic dairy and beef farm. It was after working for this mentor and being a part of his operation that he fell in love with beef cattle farming.

“I wanted to graze animals and to be close to them, and I have always been interested in producing a quality end product,” Sergi said. “I know it sounds cliché, but I’m Italian, and a lot revolves around food and the dinner table, especially in our family. Producing a quality product that brings families together and helps to create memories is my goal.”

### WORKING THE LAND

Currently, Sergi owns 143 acres, but operates 250 in total by leasing some nearby land. He has seven large paddocks that he uses in rotation for his beef cattle to graze. That allows for the grasses to replenish for the next grazing visit by the herd of 50 head. Keeping his herd in low-stress conditions at all times is a high priority. Sergi believes that his cattle are happy, and live in healthy conditions, which produces a better meat.

While Sergi does not breed on his farm, he puts great care into where he sources his feeder cattle. “I take pride in buying from two farms whose



• Left: The pasture corral is a pathway for the cattle to move from one paddock to another. Right: The cattle move toward an area for water, limited grains, and an oak savanna where they can seek shade on hot days. •

operations I can see firsthand.” he said. “If I bought them at a commercial market auction, I would have no idea where they came from, or how they were treated.” Sergi has a personal relationship with his suppliers and he knows what their farms look like, and whether they have the same values he does, as seen in their properties, and how organized they are. He is also concerned with how the animals have been treated.

“I believe in raising animals in a low-stress environment,” Sergi said. “When I buy the animals, I walk into their pens and see how they react to me. Calm, docile animals reassure me that I can be confident that they have been treated right—that they’ve been around humans a lot, and were treated kindly.”

Sergi relates his low-stress farming values and approach to an outcome of happy animals that therefore don’t need anti-biotics, growth hormones, or steroids. “When I visit my pastures, I see the cattle kicking, running, and jumping like little kids, and I know they are happy,” he said. “They have a much better, healthier, and fully natural life with me, than the one where they would have stood on concrete all the time, or live in unnatural conditions. My end product is truly great meat because of how I raise them.”

### LIFE ON THE FARM

To become a farmer, Sergi says there are your average days, and a few that are a bit tougher. “A hard day is in the spring, when I’m trying to plant corn and do spring tillage, while also rotating the animals and making hay. There are long hours and days where I am swamped. Then in the fall, I harvest

corn and beans, and do the fall tillage,” he said. Sergi was always a hard worker, which was ingrained in him at a young age by his parents.

### THE BEST POSSIBLE BEEF

Sergi only works with two processing companies, ones that are USDA-inspected. “USDA is the premier inspection and uses the most humane and top criteria. There is always an inspector present,” Sergi said. “My sales are across state lines, so they must go through a USDA-inspected facility, which I also like because they have higher standards in product labeling and packaging.”

Sergi Farm’s all-natural grass-finished beef is dry-aged for two weeks for an excellent outcome, which his customers attest to. The Lauderdale Landing, a restaurant in Lauderdale Lakes, sells the Sergi Burger, and it’s a crowd favorite. Some customers like to stop by the farm to pick-up their orders, as they enjoy the farm experience and to learn about Sergi’s values.

“I love being here at the farm. The property is a perk. At the end of day, I take a ride around the farm to check on things. It’s a very peaceful place,” he said.

In the end, Sergi loves his beef cattle and gives them the best possible life. “It’s reassuring to know that I am producing the best product I can for other families—including my own—and knowing how my animals are raised makes it all worth it.” U

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