

# Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

*Press Release*

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For Immediate Release

## **V. MAC BALDWIN NAMED 2008 NORTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Von M. “V. Mac” Baldwin of Yanceyville, N.C., has carved out a unique market in the beef business by selling fresh and frozen cuts of his grass-fed Charolais cattle directly to organic stores and consumers. “Our cattle generate weekly cash flow,” he says. “That is almost unheard of in the beef business—to get weekly cash flow from a breeding herd.”

He maintains more than 400 Charolais cows on about 800 acres of owned land and 900 acres of leased pastures. His calves are grass-fed to slaughter weight prior to processing into kitchen-ready cuts. In addition, he raises hatching eggs on contract and uses the poultry litter waste as a low-cost organic fertilizer for his forages. “We feed the litter to the grass and let the grass feed the cows,” he explains.

As a result of his accomplishments as a beef and poultry producer, Baldwin has been selected as the 2008 North Carolina winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Baldwin now joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 14 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

He started farming in 1969 while working full time off the farm as an electrical engineer. That is when he bought two registered Charolais heifers and rented his wife Peggy’s 19-acre home farm. He continued to rent farms and gradually expanded his Charolais herd. In 1981, he bought his first farm, 331 acres in Caswell County, N.C. He has since bought four more farms.

V. Mac and Peggy have two adopted children. Their daughter Patti lives nearby and is a nurse at Duke Medical Center. Their son Craig bought an adjoining farm where he raises stocker cattle. Baldwin credits Craig for persuading he and Peggy to borrow the money needed to buy their first farm.

In the early 1990’s, Baldwin began to convert his fescue-based pastures to year-round grazing featuring winter and summer annuals. His winter component is a mix of rye, Marshall ryegrass and crimson clover. His summer component is Red River crabgrass. “This forage system is high in total digestible nutrients and protein,” he says. “We can easily put two to three pounds of daily gain on growing cattle without the need for grain or hay. It is a remarkable forage plan that will work anywhere in the Southeast.”

Baldwin also feeds fresh fruit byproducts from a nearby processing plant. The rinds and trimmings from fresh watermelons, cantaloupes and pineapples serve to stretch his grass supplies. To use this feed, Baldwin had to come up with trucking, watertight trailers and concrete feed bunks. “We can even feed the fruit trimmings to our grass-fed steers if we need to,” he says.

His hatching egg operation consists of four 525-foot houses, each with about 48,000 hens. The hens produce about eight million hatching eggs plus about 1,200 tons of poultry litter each year. His son Craig is currently building two new breeder houses for his own poultry operation.

Baldwin’s beef operation evolved over time. He started by selling registered Charolais to purebred producers. Then, during the 1990’s, he sold grain-finished steers to the Kentucky-based Laura’s Lean Beef Company. To take advantage of his own breeding genetics, he started buying back Charolais steers from his bull customers and finishing them out. “One time, we had 15 steers too many to fit onto the truck going to the processing plant,” he recalls. “These were big, 1,250- to 1,300-pound steers that needed a home. So we ended up selling them as freezer beef to consumers who raved over the flavor and quality. This opened our eyes to the potential for direct-marketing.”

“When we started selling grass-fed beef, we had to learn how to market,” he says. So he built a Web site, [www.baldwinbeef.com](http://www.baldwinbeef.com), to bring in customers. Using dry ice and insulated packaging, he can ship anywhere east of the Mississippi River within three days. However, most of his customers come from the Durham-Raleigh-Chapel Hill metro region. His popular “Family 5 Pac” includes a 10-pound box of five frozen cuts that sells for \$65. “By direct-marketing, we are able to do what most cattlemen can’t,” says Baldwin. “We determine the price of what we sell.”

Another key to his success is his relationship with meat processor Abdul Chaudhry with Chaudhry Halal Meats, Siler City, N.C. “He came to America as a 16-year-old not speaking English,” says Baldwin. “Today, he owns a modern USDA-inspected plant with a huge chill room which allows us to dry-age our beef sides. His workforce attends to details and puts our label on each package. Most importantly, the staff is honest and that makes a huge difference in this business.”

Another business breakthrough came when Baldwin was invited to sell at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. “That really taught us how to sell,” he says. “We were face-to-face with consumers selling beef week after week. They would come back and give us valuable feedback. Our beef became so popular with the people of Carrboro and Chapel Hill, they wanted it available at their local Whole Foods Market. This is an upscale market with high-income clientele, and that store’s team leaders became our advocates. Thus, we are now selling in seven Whole Foods stores in North and South Carolina.”

“We use no hormones or antibiotics in our cattle,” he says. “These are important issues for our customers. We didn’t start out to have a branded beef product, but that is what we

have. Our growth is only limited by the number of grass-fed steers that we can develop and finish. We currently market about 300 steers per year, and our goal is to direct-market 500 Charolais steers annually within the next five years. We have the right model—it's just a matter of renting or clearing more land and expanding the cowherd. There is no way we could sell 300 registered Charolais bulls per year. There are just not that many potential bull buyers. But I have 2.5 million potential beef buyers within an hour drive of our farm.”

Baldwin is active in Gideons International. He serves as 2008 president of the North Carolina Forage and Grassland Council and he is a member of the North Carolina Extension State Advisory Council. He is also called on to speak at forage conferences and cattle association meetings in North Carolina

Ken Powell with North Carolina Farm Bureau is the state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year award in North Carolina. Baldwin was nominated for the honor by Hester Vernon III, president of the Farm Bureau in Caswell County. Vernon said his local Farm Bureau board felt that Baldwin would be a strong candidate because he has a diversified operation and because of his active participation in Farm Bureau and other agricultural organizations.

As the North Carolina state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Baldwin will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher International of Jacksonville, FL, a jacket and a \$200 gift certificate from the Williamson-Dickie Company, and a \$500 gift certificate from Southern States.

He is also now eligible for the \$14,000 that will go to the overall winner. Other prizes for the overall winner include the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for year from Massey Ferguson North America, a custom made Canvasback gun safe from Misty Morn Safe Co., and another \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States cooperative. Also, Williamson-Dickie will provide another jacket, a \$500 gift certificate and \$500 in cash to the overall winner.

Swisher International, through its Swisher Sweets cigar brand, and the Sunbelt Expo are sponsoring the Southeastern Farmer of the Year Award for the 19<sup>th</sup> consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$724,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from North Carolina include John Vollmer of Bunn, 1990; Kenneth Jones of Pink Hill, 1991; John Howard, Jr. of Deep Run, 1992; Carlyle Ferguson of Waynesville, 1993; Dick Tunnell of Swan Quarter, 1994; Allan Lee Baucom of Monroe, 1995; Scott Whitford of Grantsboro, 1996; Williams Covington, Sr. of Mebane, 1997; Phil McLain of Statesville, 1998; Earl Hendrix of Raeford, 1999; Reid Gray of Statesville, 2000; Rusty Cox of Monroe, 2001; Craven Register of Clinton, 2002; Frank Howey, Jr. of Monroe, 2003; Eddie Johnson of Elkin, 2004; Danny McConnell of Hendersonville, 2005; Tommy Porter of Concord, 2006 and Bill Cameron of Raeford, 2007.

North Carolina has had two overall winners with Eddie Johnson of Elkin being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 2004 and Bill Cameron being named in 2007.

Baldwin's farm, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges during the week of Aug. 4-8. The judges for this year include Jim Butler, a retired USDA agricultural engineer and research leader; Elwyn Deal, a retired Clemson University Extension leader; and James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000.

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**Note to media:** The farm of V. Mac Baldwin will be visited by the judges on Thursday, Aug. 7 from 12:30 p.m. until 3:30 p.m. The Baldwin's farm is located at 5341 NC Hwy 86 South, Yanceyville, NC 27379. If you would like to visit the farm during the judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at [jbbatson@ctc.net](mailto:jbbatson@ctc.net), or contact the Baldwins by calling 336-694-4218.