

Papa Joe's PRODUCE & Two-Bit Ranch

Joe Wesnitzer hasn't been this happy in a long time. Puffing on a cigarette at his 50-plus acre ranch nestled in the base of the Big Horns, he watches a newborn Scottish Highland calf sidle up to its mother. Her long hair rustles in the breeze as she licks the baby's hindquarters. Puffy clouds slide across the light blue sky as the sun burns off the chill of early morning.

"I'm on the verge of turning 60, and I feel like an 8-year-old kid again," he said with a big smile. "I can't believe I get to wake up and do this every day."

Originally from Sheridan, Joe has been waiting to come home for decades after spending the bulk of his career in Colorado, working for a telephone company and helping to raise his grandchildren. Not a fan of Colorado, he was more or less counting days and biding his time. In his ball cap with a short gray pony tail sprouting out back, Joe doesn't look much like the typical rancher.

Ranching was his older brother's idea – as were the Scottish Highland cattle – which aren't commonly seen around here though their long hair and bulky frames do well in the mountains,



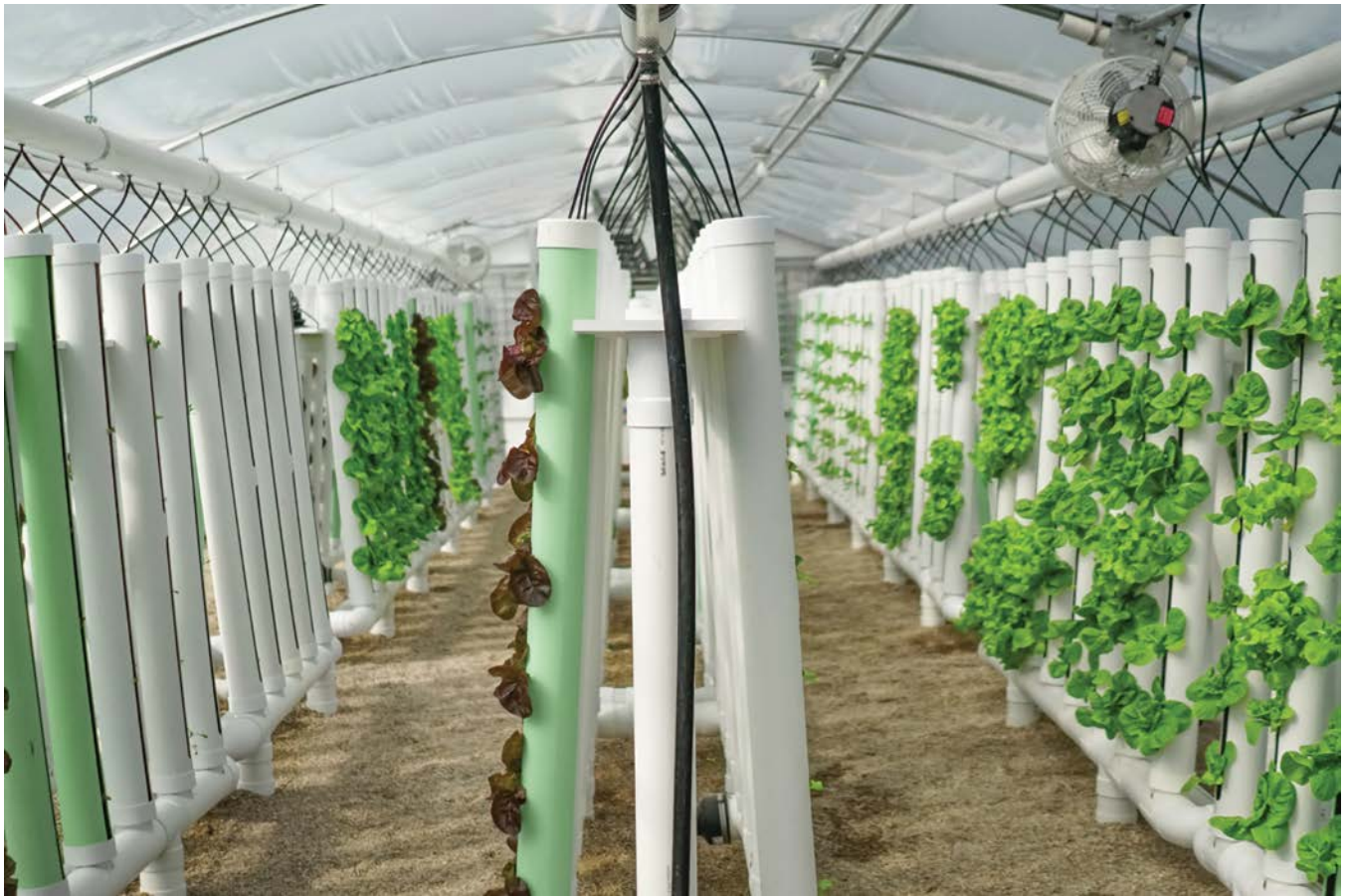
according to Joe. His first Highland cow Emgie came from Miles City, and supposedly there's a children's book written about her, but Joe's never seen it. In the past couple years, they've grown their herd up to 18 cattle, a bull and several newborn calves.

A couple days ago, one of their cows prolapsed during birth and Joe and his girlfriend Carol Sims, neither of whom come from a ranching background, have been learning things the hard way. Despite the long hours and the sometimes-laborious learning curve, Joe is out here having fun.

The beef gets sold at Landon's weekly Saturday Market, along with his vegetables, courtesy of his current experimentation with hydroponics, which make up the other arm of his operation. Right now, he has a greenhouse full of leafy vegetables and the bones of another greenhouse lay in wait beside it.

Inside the greenhouse, the temperature averages a balmy 86 degrees, prompting Carol and her daughter Kelly to throw on their bikinis and do a little sunbathing mid-winter. In the muggy air, recycled water trickles overhead down through a series of white, plastic PVC pipe cylinders, which sprout the plants. More than 200 towers produce over 1,000 plants.





The sun is his only source of heat, and other than a pump, a couple fans for circulation and a swamp cooler to moderate heat in the summer, it's pretty much a confined system. He built and designed it all on his own, costing him about a quarter of a pre-built.

"I couldn't afford to buy one," he said, "so I built it."

This is his fourth design as he continues to tweak his system. In the next greenhouse, he'll double up production with two rows of plants per tower.

He initially got interested in hydroponics after being introduced to it through his grandniece and her boyfriend. From there, Joe took some classes online and attended a few workshops at Bright Agrotech in Laramie, which has since been bought out by Plenty, and like everything else, he simply learned through trial and error. He was drawn to the ingenuity of the system and the ability to have leafy, green vegetables year-round.

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He started building it two years ago in August, and by spring, had his first crop of lettuce, which he sold at the farmer’s market.

“People were pretty surprised when I walked in with a cooler full of lettuce in March,” he said.

To his knowledge, there are no other commercial hydroponic growers in town. Although he wished there were, so they could bounce ideas off of one another and save themselves some of the headaches – like his current outbreak of algae in a few of the towers.

Right now, he restricts his crops to seven varieties of lettuce, and Swiss chard, kale and basil. Eventually, he’ll move on to root vegetables like tomatoes and onions. For the most part, his system is organic, though he does use a man-made product to help mitigate the algae.

The process starts with a seed pod that is inserted into a green, growth medium that looks and feels like the turf on a football field. The medium cushions the seedling on both sides and acts like a soil. It needs to be cleaned about once a week after harvesting, so Joe unscrews the cylinder and takes it outside for a power wash to prevent algae from growing.

It’s a laborious job and thus far not terribly lucrative. He laughs when asked about his profit margin. Money-wise, he’s definitely still in the red. To build the greenhouse system cost him just under \$25,000. Every seed pod is about 60 cents to plant while his lettuce sells for only \$10 a pound, which includes anywhere from two to four plants.







“I don’t even want to add up the hours of labor,” he said with a laugh.

Technically, he’s retired and is more or less just having fun, though he’d like to make a little money. This will entail building a second greenhouse and hiring on some laborers. For now, his granddaughter is going to join him at his farmer’s market booth this summer and plans to grow and sell strawberries.

“She’ll make more money than me because she’s a lot cuter,” he said, grinning.

And though he still runs into the occasional elderly shopper who refuses to buy any vegetable not grown directly in the ground, Joe says people are open to hydroponics, and the local gardening community has never been exclusive. He’d like to see hydroponics catch on, and right now, he and his friend Donald Legerski are building miniature systems to be used in local schools and with Sheridan 4-H kids.

Who would have thought that a retired telephone guy would ever become a hydroponic rancher, Joe wonders daily, but for now he’s going to make a big salad and watch the sun go down.

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