

INVESTING IN RANCHING, INVESTING IN COMMUNITY

BY SARAH TILT



Photos courtesy of Green Door Photography

Fourth-generation Montana ranchers Eric and Emma Wickens are finding balance in how they ranch, raise their family, and care for their land. With their ranch in Winifred and their newly established meat supply company in Bozeman, they are investing in the Gallatin community, developing relationships and providing urban consumers with access to high-quality Montana beef.

Eric, 40, says the best part of ranching is being able to work intimately with his family and the land at the same time. Eric understands that the health of the land, the livestock, and his family are all connected, and he admits that finding a balance among the three is a daily challenge.

“Balance has to be strived for,” he says. “Emma and I think about what we want our lives to look like and work backwards from there. We are building ranching around the life we want to have. The ranch doesn’t define who we are as a family, but I have a big responsibility to do the best I can for the people, land, water, livestock, wildlife, and community.”

While the Wickenses enjoy ranching as a way of life, staying in business requires generating an income and that means diversification. Eric’s mother and father expanded upon their ranching practices by adding activities such as outfitted hunting and guest horseback rides. Later, Eric’s father became a gunsmith. As Eric and his three siblings—Matt, Jason, and Nicole—came of age, they took a lesson from their parents, with Eric maintaining the family ranch and Matt including outfitting and summer guest trips within his own ranching operations. Jason and Nicole leaned into their creative talents: Jason became a musician and songwriter, co-founding Live From The Divide, a music venue in Bozeman, and Nicole is a photographer in Missoula.

More recently, the three brothers teamed up to establish Wickens Ranch Beef as a direct-to-consumer meat supply in

Bozeman. They offer a wide variety of premium Montana beef in various locations around Bozeman with free home delivery or pickup at their cooler.

The shuttering of packing plants due to COVID sent shock waves through our nation’s food supply system and exposed threats to our food security. But it also created opportunities to make changes and improvements to our system so that it can be more profitable for producers, more regionally sourced and sustained, and more satisfying for consumers.

Selling locally is an intentional decision to maintain sustainability and family work-life balance, as well as invest and be present in the Greater Gallatin community. The Wickenses are focused on developing relationships and, as such, they attend farmers markets and donate beef packages to local nonprofits to aid in fundraising efforts.

The brothers designed the business around raising healthy animals on healthy landscapes to create a consistent supply for consumers and an enhanced eating experience. Eric believes in a common-sense, balanced approach: Their beef comes from a high-quality, 2- to 3-year-old cow using no artificial hormones. These females are finished on a 50-percent ration of forage, hay, and straw, and 50-percent pulse crops (barley, peas, lentils, chickpeas, flax). Finishing them on locally grown crops helps to mellow out the fat while retaining the flavor of the meat.

By ranching with connection to land, family, crops, and community, the Wickenses are finding balance in all seasons of life. 🌾

Sarah Tilt is the executive director of One Montana, a nonprofit working to support private land stewardship and working lands, sustain our cultural heritage, and connect our urban and rural communities. One Montana’s campaign, The Montana Way, is an effort to educate and provide resources for all Montanans to steward our private and public resources and continue traditions for the next generation.