



**A modern steward  
of an ancient pursuit,  
Todd Churchill '93  
is raising cattle the  
old-fashioned way,  
and the health  
benefits are amazing.**

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BY **Kim Ode** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Tom Roster**

**Arizona**

**P**PASTURE BY PASTURE, steer by steer, rib eye by rib eye, Todd Churchill is changing the way America eats. The roots of this dining revolution are nestled in the Sogn Valley, a stretch of ancient coulee just east of Northfield, Minnesota, through which the Cannon River flows. Churchill fell in love with the valley in the early 1990s while he was a student driving back and forth between St. Olaf College and his family home in Orient, Illinois.

Today, its sheltering bluffs are among the thousand hills of Churchill's venture, Thousand Hills Cattle Co., purveyors of grass-fed beef. The reference is biblical, from Psalm 50:10: "For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills."

"God is reminding David that, while he may be the king of Israel, the cattle across a thousand hills are God's, and he's entrusting us to be good stewards," Churchill says. It's a moral compass that he takes a step further: "I believe the food industry is supposed to be about distributing nourishing food that makes people well."

The five-year-old company is on an uphill climb. Churchill smiles and says that Thousand Hills supplies one-seventh of 1 percent of the beef consumed in the 12-county Twin Cities metro area. But the self-deprecating candor with which he shares that statistic also carries an unswerving sense of confidence. It's as if he's saying, remember that statistic, because someday it's going to show how far we've come.

It's tempting to think that Churchill's trademark cowboy hat is a marketing ploy. "But I've been wearing cowboy hats since I was three years old," he says, describing growing up on a farm where his dad raised cutting horses. Still, he never imagined that he'd be wearing such a hat while making his own living.

Churchill's path might lend hope to St. Olaf students who wonder how it is we wind up doing what we're meant to do. His story seems a classic case of serendipity. Yet it grows clear that he also created his own luck by looking deep and then looking beyond — a trait of the visionary that's in his DNA.

His grandfather, an attorney by trade, was such a visionary. In 1929, he withdrew his money before the stock market crashed, then traveled three times around the world. When he settled again in Illinois in the early 1940s, he noted with dismay that he was raising his family near potential danger.

"The Rock Island Arsenal was on an island in the Mississippi and considered a target for the Germans," Churchill says. "The war was going so poorly at that point that he wanted a place to move his family in case the Germans bombed us." In 1942, he bought a 40-acre farm downstate in Orient as a safe haven for his family, growing row crops and raising beef cattle. But this safe existence also was remarkably uneventful, and his grandfather grew bored with the farming life. He offered Churchill's father, then 16, the chance to run the place. "My dad had a passion for horses, so he took him up on it," and began raising cutting horses. Yet showing practicality, his father also earned a law degree himself and made a living representing small family businesses.

#### VOCATIONAL PURSUITS

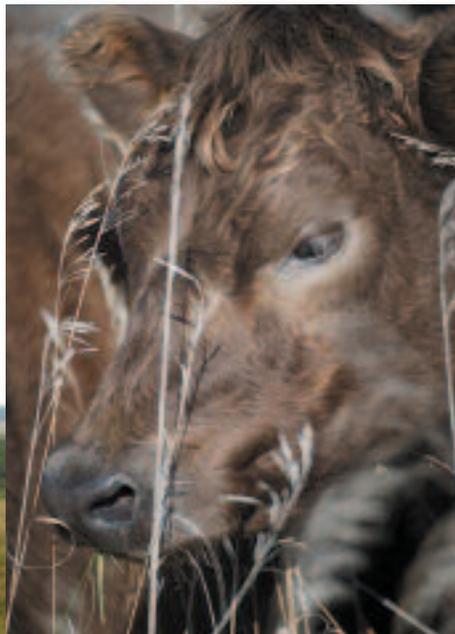
When Churchill, now 37, began looking for colleges, he learned about St. Olaf "from looking through some college guide." He came up for a visit and fell in love with the area. "I like winter, like to cross-country and downhill ski," he says. "It felt like home the moment I moved here."

His educational direction was less preordained. He spent one disastrous semester pursuing the idea of becoming a veterinarian. "I made a deal with the biology and chemistry professors that if they'd give me a C-minus, I'd never again set foot in the science department," he says, laughing.

His father had always said that accounting is the language of business, so he took accounting courses, if only to give his education some focus. While looking at job descriptions in various fields, he noticed that the first requirement was always a degree in that particular pursuit, "but the second one was always, *always* 'excellent oral and written communication skills,'" he says.

He became a speech and communications major, reveling in the seat-of-your-pants challenge of extemporaneous speaking. Earning his degree in 1993, he took the accounting exam and entered the business world as a certified public accountant.

It's worth noting at this point that nothing in Churchill's habits hinted that food would



become an almost evangelical focus of his life. But indications began to appear that doing what everyone else did was not always right for him.

He took his first job with a large accounting firm in the Twin Cities “and I was fired on March 4, 1994.” The company had a policy of taking attendance at 8 a.m. each morning, “and just out of principle, I couldn’t be in my cubicle at 8 a.m.,” he says with a flicker of mischief. “To fire me in the middle of tax season tells you how much they really didn’t want me there.”

He landed another job with a smaller, more entrepreneurial firm, but failed to grasp how the other accountants found such satisfaction in perfectly tallied rows of figures. What he *did* enjoy was working with small businesses — much as his father had. He saw that what many of them needed was a chief financial officer but also knew it was a position that few could afford.

Churchill decided to begin offering his services as a part-time CFO on an hourly basis to small businesses, preparing their financial statements and going with them to meetings with their bankers. Over the next 10 years, he worked with more than 90 businesses in the area. Among them was Mike Lorentz’s meat processing plant in Cannon Falls.

Lorentz was another visionary. “Mike believed we were going to have an explosion of specialty meats — grass-fed beef, bison, etc. — and what was needed was a special processing plant.” Churchill helped him secure the financing, little dreaming it would change his own life.

### GRASS ROOTS

It was in early 2002 that Lorentz sent Churchill an article by Michael Pollan from *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* that documented a steer’s path from frisky calf to rib eye steak. The article eventually became part of Pollan’s 2006 bestseller, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, the story of how he spent five years learning about where our food comes from and how safe it is.

Pollan came down especially hard on beef, specifically corn-fed beef. He made the case that grass-fed beef makes more sense ecologically because it’s sustainable and enables a farmer to produce food from land that may be unsuited to traditional row-crop agriculture.

Yet corn-fed beef has become the standard because it brings cattle up to slaughter weight more quickly. Time is money, and a combo of savvy marketing and habit has convinced several generations of American consumers that corn-fed beef is best.

Pollan took his exploration a step further, however, asking whether eating corn-feed beef is healthy for us — or for the steer. His answer was a resounding “no.”

The role of too much saturated fat in our diets has been well documented as contributing to heart disease and obesity. What is less familiar to a nation of diners is how corn “wreaks considerable havoc on bovine digestion,” Pollan wrote in the *New York Times* article. “Cows rarely live on feedlot diets for more than six months, which might be about as much as their digestive systems can tolerate.”

Antibiotics help maintain an animal’s health, and hormone injections help it pack on weight. That we then end up consuming the whole enchilada in our enchiladas is the resulting dilemma of Pollan’s book title.

Churchill read the magazine article with a growing realization that he rarely, if ever, ate beef anymore. “But I didn’t know that I’d actually decided this, and I wondered why,” he says. He’d grown up eating beef — “our own beef” — and enjoyed it. But over time, he realized that he wasn’t enjoying its taste, and, worse, it gave him indigestion. With Pollan’s article, he wondered if the feedlot culture was a reason.

Curious, Churchill and his wife, Dee Ann, tracked down several farms that raised grass-fed beef and bought some meat from each. They cooked some beef from the first farm “and it was the best beef we’d ever eaten in our lives.”

Then they cooked some from a second farm “and it was the gamiest, rankest, toughest steak we’d ever eaten.”

Why was there such a difference in two samples of grass-fed beef? Clearly, there wasn’t going to be a simple solution, which only spurred Churchill on.

“The bane of a liberal arts education,” he says, smiling, “is that you’re innately curious about everything.”

He began exploring why the beef varied so greatly, and in doing so, he learned that there are more health food stores per capita in the Twin Cities than anywhere except San Francisco. In other words, it appeared that a consumer market existed for beef raised without hormones and antibiotics and under humane conditions. Still, the product’s quality remained a gamble, and “healthy food that doesn’t taste good is a short-lived proposition.” Churchill set out to solve the puzzle.

**“I believe the food industry is supposed to be about distributing nourishing food that makes people well.”**

— TODD CHURCHILL



## BACK TO BASICS

Time out for a quick tutorial on agronomy and biology. No, wait, it'll be fun!

Cattle have three stomachs — the trio is called a rumen. The rumen is specially designed to convert leaves and stems into energy, which then gets stored as muscle and fat. For centuries, grass has created meat and milk.

“Only recently have we asked cattle to change corn into meat and milk,” Churchill says, the logic apparently being that if pigs and chickens can do it, so can cattle. But the rumen isn't designed to digest grain. A grain diet changes the stomach's acids so that, over time, cows can get sick unless given antibiotics.

Cattle have changed, too. Great strides in genetic cross-breeding have created steers that are better able to carry a lot of weight on their frames and put that weight on quickly, lessening the time on feed.

So Churchill's task became two-fold: rediscover the traditional breeds that fed on grass and then find which grass makes good beef.

He worked with breed consultants in Argentina, New Zealand and the United States to find the right strains and settled on old-fashioned British breeds such as red or black Angus, Shorthorn Herefords and Scottish Highlands. “Celtic records show that 2,000 years ago, they were nurturing the art of cattle selection for fat, because fat was the most precious commodity on earth,” staving off hunger but also satisfying taste buds.

“It's what the Indians knew with the buffalo and its hump. No Dakota would ever eat muscle without spreading some fat from the hump over it like we spread jam on bread,” Churchill says.

To counteract the cross-breeding that's been practiced for decades, Churchill notes, they're even using bull semen frozen since the 1950s to recapture some of those old lines.

He also considers a steer's disposition: “I don't want cattle that will spook or are flighty, what we call ‘high-headed’ cattle.”

But the animal is only half of the equation, and even the lesser half. This truly is a case in which cattle are what cattle eat. Even more, what they eat depends less on the grass itself than the soil in which it grows. “Growing good grass is an art, not a science,” Churchill says. So, much of his focus is on “raising” good soil.

“This is where all the old-time wisdom comes in,” he says, although noting, “some fabulous science is going on in agronomy.”

The pasture below the Churchills' modest bluff-top home sprouts tall fescue, meadow fescue and red and white clover. Churchill is a poster boy for sustainable agriculture; he refers to leaves of grass as solar panels. He'll talk at length about how growing grass sequesters atmospheric carbon in the soil instead of releasing it to the slice of a plow.

That he's able to talk about this arcane knowledge and make it sound nothing less than fascinating is tribute to those years of extemporaneous speaking.

Through a system of moving the cattle across the pasture from enclosure to enclosure, he said he was able to graze the land five times last summer. That, he calculated, worked out to 500 pounds of beef per acre.

During the winter, he moves his herd to a sandy-bottomed pasture that never gets muddy and distributes huge rolls of hay throughout the acres. The cattle eat at will. The only equipment he needs is a tractor.

Thousand Hills works with 50 farms through the upper Midwest, mostly in Minnesota. There are strict protocols that the farmers agree to uphold, such as what grasses to raise and how long a calf stays on mother's milk. Churchill eyeballs each animal at least once, and more often several times over the course of its life.

“Legally, the company works as a benevolent dictatorship,” he said, smiling. “But it actually functions very much like a cooperative” among farmers and ranchers who believe in the philosophy's health benefits for humans and animals alike.

The traditional beef industry has taken a lot of bad-mouthing in the shift away from corn. Yet the National Beef Cattlemen's Association has taken a circumspect approach, stating only that the grass-fed market offers further choice to consumers.

And how is the consumer responding to this choice? Churchill regularly brings along a grill to sear some burgers for a skeptical potential client. The beef does taste different.

**“Todd has a spiritual connection with this effort. It's an expression of his faith to be doing this.”**

— TWIN CITIES CHEF J.D. FRATZKE





Churchill rediscovered traditional grass-grazing cattle by working with breed consultants in Argentina, New Zealand and the United States to find the right strains. He settled on old-fashioned British breeds such as black or red Angus, Shorthorn Herefords and Scottish Highlands.

Older generations often say it's how they remember beef tasting, while younger diners often are experiencing something new.

Churchill's most delicate balancing act now is making sure there is supply enough to meet the demand he's working to create. The beef is available at various grocery stores and co-ops in Minnesota and Wisconsin (check their website at [thousandhillscattleco.com](http://thousandhillscattleco.com)). It's also served in the dining halls of St. Olaf and Macalester colleges.

"We kill 22 animals a week, so it's a limited supply of beef," he says, although one that's growing over time. For comparison, he noted the kill rate at Tyson Foods in Lincoln, Neb., the nation's largest meat processing plant. "At Tyson, more cattle are killed by noon on Jan. 2 than we'll kill all year."

Last year, when Twin Cities chef J.D. Fratzke opened his new steak place in St. Paul, the Strip Club Meat & Fish, he was determined to serve only Thousand Hills beef. Fratzke had become a disciple of serving sustainable and local food while cooking at Muffaletta, another St. Paul restaurant, and had developed a relationship with the folks at the Southeast Minnesota Food Network.

Through them, he met Churchill, "and I got to learn more about grass-fed beef than I ever thought I would know in my life." He'd always felt a sense of civic pride in serving local foods to his diners and keeping money in the Minnesota economy. Through Churchill, he was experiencing a more somber revelation: learning what using grass as feed means to the natural cycle.

"I didn't know how damaging it was to raise cattle on grain," Fratzke says. "Primarily it's our country that changed a natural cycle that's existed since man started to raise cattle,"

given that corn is indigenous to North America.

"It made me look a lot farther into the diet of the other tasty creatures I was serving," he says. "It really came down to Ockham's razor — the simplest solution is usually the correct one."

Fratzke pauses and begins again.

"One other thing I want to say, and I hope I'm not getting too private, but Todd [Churchill] has a spiritual connection with this effort. It's an expression of his faith to be doing this, and I think that's really beautiful. We don't share the same beliefs — I'm a practitioner of Buddhism — but one of the reasons he's doing this is that he thinks it's a spiritually important mission, and I do, too."

Churchill takes a long view of almost everything, another attribute from his years at St. Olaf. He and Dee Ann are raising six children, the last two being a new set of twins, so he takes the future seriously.

Yet he relies on what the past can teach. For that matter, he can trace his ancestors back to 1685, to English families who settled in Connecticut. "I'm the first one in my family to live west of the Mississippi," he says, "and it's not by much." If Churchill has a pipe dream about his alma mater, it's that St. Olaf someday will offer students a chance to major in their selected field and then earn a minor in grass-fed beef. "We could create a closed system where they're growing the grass, raising the cattle, processing and eating the food," he says. "It would be knowledge that they could take with them out into the world." 🐄

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