



OPENING THE GATE

Inspiring producers to pursue growth by sharing of local success stories

Sage Choice



In the late 1990s, Melbournite Chris Balazs decided he'd like to raise his family in the country. So when he found a 100 acre property in Bannockburn for the same price as a 20 acre property in the region, he jumped at the chance. Starting with only a few cows as 'lawn mowers', Chris built a successful farm, initially using conventional farming techniques before embracing the 'paddock to plate' concept.

Chris worked hard honing his farming philosophy and building the business. SAGE Choice has a strong commitment to ethical, sustainable farming, producing 100% grass-fed and low stress stock, and making use of every part of the animal – no wastage. Chris is dedicated to farming & business transparency throughout the entire process, and believes that simple, whole foods provide the best health benefits and product quality.

Right from the beginning, Chris has embraced the concept of learning and continual improvement. If something doesn't work, he researches, adjusts, and tries again. He aims for advancement and improvement always, and this dedication to education—along with years of honest hard work—has contributed to what is now an extremely successful business.

SAGE Choice currently runs 35 – 45 head of cattle, with two or three processed per week. Chris maintains a bull with the herd year-round, retaining the natural herd structure to ensure there are calves growing throughout the year and there is always stock ready for processing and sale. The calves are passively weaned from the cows, and kept in a natural herd structure until going directly to slaughter. Lambs are also bought in from other small producers for fattening, and are processed at the rate of about 10-12 per week.

Initially Chris had his livestock processed and butchered off site, but he found the offal was being wasted, and so, true to his 'no wastage' philosophy, Chris built infrastructure which allows him to butcher his stock on site. This required a large capital investment in order to meet the strict PrimeSafe compliance requirements. SAGE Choice's investment strategy is vertical integration from their own small cattle truck to a meat transport vehicle, an artisan butchery and a storage & packaging coolroom on the property. This allows them to store their meat safely and legally, and then distribute it to places like farmers' markets. The stock is slaughtered at Koallah Farm and then taken straight back to Sage Farm for butchering, packaging, labelling, storing and then sale.



“Strong commitment to ethical, sustainable farming.”

This expansion of the business has meant that Chris now employs a full-time butcher, a part-time social media manager, and three other staff members. As the business grows, the challenge that presents itself is how to continue the growth while still maintaining and honouring the ethics on which the business was first built.

SAGE Choice’s marketing has always focused on the product, first and foremost. The product is key: it is a premium, high-quality product and absolutely central to their marketing strategy. SAGE sells through a diverse list of outlets: through local providores, their onsite farm shop, at farmers’ markets, direct to Geelong restaurants, online via their website, and through Community Supported Agriculture monthly subscriptions. Many buyers first connect with the business at farmers’ markets, then seek the product out through other channels. Others come across SAGE after viewing ‘paddock to plate’ stories on television – Chris finds these sorts of programs always garner a spike in sales. Australian consumers are becoming more and more aware of what they are eating, and the ethics of the products they consume. TV shows like Masterchef have also raised awareness of alternative cuts of meat, which have proven popular with SAGE’s customers.

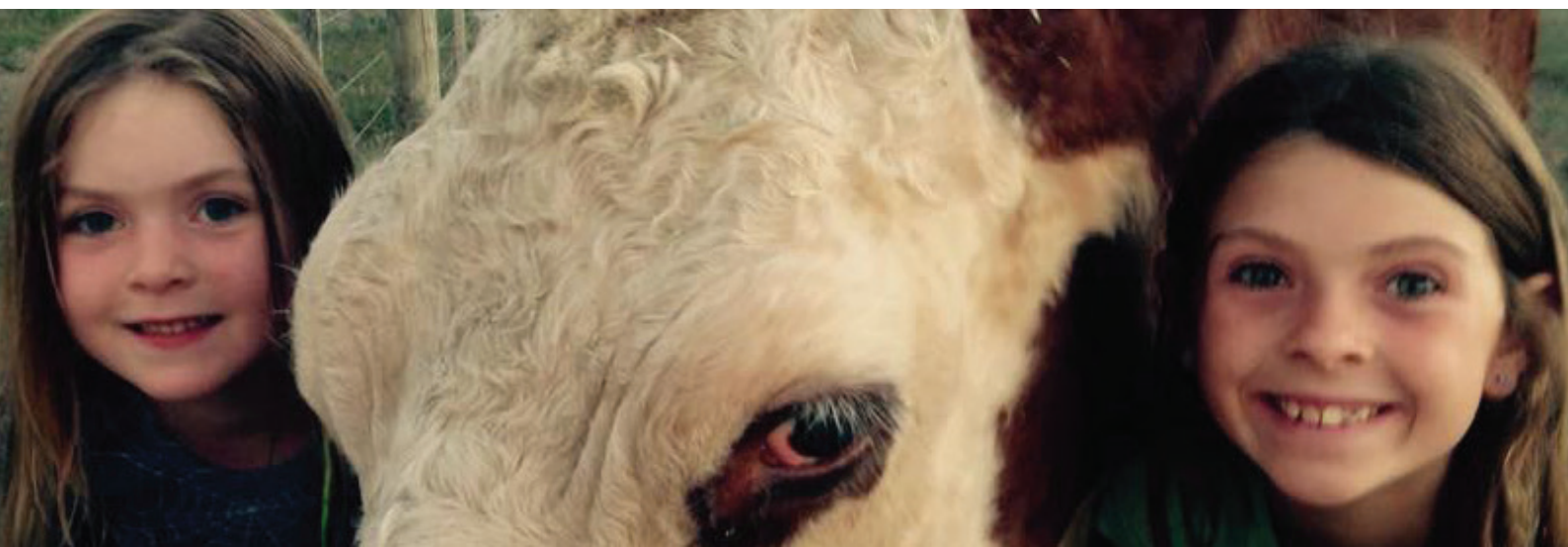


HIGHLIGHTS:

- 1 Paddock-to-plate concept.
- 2 Premium, high-quality product is central to the marketing strategy.
- 3 Ensures transparency across both farming and business.
- 4 Uses social media to share the paddock-to-plate journey with customers.



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“Many buyers first connect with the business at farmers’ markets.”



Chris uses Instagram as a key marketing tool. Through the photo-sharing app, his business is able to reach consumers who have disposable income and an interest in providing natural and healthy foods for their young families. Instagram allows Chris to share a behind-the-scenes look at where the product comes from and its journey from paddock to plate. In a community where people are increasingly interested in where their food comes from and how it is produced, this has made for high engagement and sales. In addition to social media, SAGE also advertises in consumer magazines and through their presence at farmers’ markets.

SAGE Choice has seen continuous growth and expansion since it began 5 years ago. Looking to the future, Chris is considering expanding into agritourism, including butchery workshops and classes, potentially in partnership with The Gordon. Given its location, the property would also fit well into local food trails, if other nearby producers were keen and an integrated marketing strategy was developed.

Chris’ main advice for new agricultural businesses is to make sure they have a strong marketing strategy in place. Agribusinesses need to consider seasonal changes and adjust their marketing plans accordingly. And as SAGE Choice has so successfully demonstrated – high quality, ethical product is king.



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