



Smokey vs. Black: A Head to Head Comparison

Brian Arbogast has been calving, weaning and back-grounding Charolais-cross calves beside straightbred Angus calves for the past six years. He says incorporating Charolais genetics into the herd is something he wishes he had done years ago.

*By Paige Nelson
Photos courtesy of Lauren Arbogast*

Chickens, crops, cattle and kids fill up most of Brian Arbogast's days. Along with his father, Mark, and brother, Brent, Arbogast grows crops, raises 900,000 broiler chickens, manages 380 head of mother cows, backgrounds their calves for six months, chases around his two boys and invites people to come see for themselves the differences in his smokey Charolais-Angus cross calves and his Angus calves.

Six years ago when Arbogast Farms, LLC put two Charolais bulls on their cow herd, the results were impressive.

"The weight that those calves (Charolais-Angus cross/smokey) weigh over the black calves that are the same age is several pounds more, maybe 50-100 lbs. more," explains Arbogast.

Weight, whether it's white, black, smokey or purple, pays at the sale barn, even in a market dominated by a "black hide is best" mentality. Beefing up weaning weights and sale weights using Charolais bulls on his primarily Angus-based cows is a strategy Arbogast says, "It's something I wish we would have done years ago."

Arbogast is a third generation rancher near Harrisonburg, Va., and explains that before the white bulls came on the place, the family farm seemed to be stuck in a trend.

"It seemed like we were stuck in the niche that you had to have black bulls and black cows. You had to have black calves. Then we met a gentleman that sold Charolais bulls. We bought two bulls from him. We got along great and really liked what we were seeing and the results," Arbogast remembers.

The following year, the farm was hungry for more Charolais, but their original supplier couldn't meet their need. That's when they met Bob Tibbs, Shadow Springs Farm, Havre de Grace, Md., their current bull supplier.

"Bob picks our bulls out every year for us, and he sends videos and pictures of them. We don't even have to go to his farm. We look at them over the Internet. He actually brings them right to us. We have a standing order with him every year that we want two to four bulls," says Arbogast.



(left to right) Brian Arbogast, brother, Brent, and father, Mark, routinely raise and feed smokey and black cattle on their northern Virginia chicken, crop and beef farm. Smokey cattle certainly deliver extra pay weight.

Fellow cattlemen in the area are surprised to learn of the success Arbogasts have experienced. The production scheme isn't something Arbogasts are trying to hide, either; in fact, they promote it.

"It seems like a lot of people are just stuck on having a black calf to sell," he says. They are worried they won't get paid what their calves are truly worth.

"I tell them come to the barn, we have black calves, we have smoked calves. Let me just show you what we've got."

The Difference is Black and White

Arbogasts keep their bull herd at about half Charolais, half Angus. They try to keep black replacement heifers, but Arbogast admits that a few smokey heifers make mothers, as well.

"We do keep a handful of the best smoked heifers. I love them! They make wonderful mothers, good milkers. We have quite a few of them in the herd," he notes.

The differences between the two sets of calves are noticeable at birth. Charolais-cross calves have heavier birth weights, heavier weaning weights and after six months of backgrounding, it's the smokey

calves that average 850 lbs. first.

Arbogast also notices distinct differences between his sires.

“The Charolais bulls are very calm to be around. I believe it comes back to the way Bob raises them.

“Our bulls live together for eight months out of the year. Those bulls live together fine. Then, in the fall of the year we bring them off the cows and put them back together. Every time, it’s the black bulls that want to fight the white bulls. It’s always the black bulls starting the pecking order,” Arbogast explains.

He also thinks the white bulls seem to winter a little better than the black bulls.



Smokey Calves

With backgrounding season from November through April, mitigating the effects of winter on its gaining calves is something Arbogast Farms has incorporated with just a few bumps along the way.

In January of 2013, Arbogast’s 900 ft. long barn burned to the ground. The barn housed the farm’s offices, working corrals and backgrounding calves. The fire started in the offices at the opposite end of the calves.

“The fire was about 250 ft. from the cattle by the time we got to them,” remembers Arbogast. It was at night, and it was dark. We weren’t sure how the cattle were going to work with all the smoke, but they were just calm. I truly couldn’t believe how calm they were with the conditions they were in. We lost all our equipment, and the barn was a total loss, but we didn’t lose any cattle.”

By Nov. 1, 2013, a new crop of calves was filing into a brand new bedded pack barn. The new barn is open on its east side and on the west side it has a curtain that can be raised or lowered depending on weather.

Selling the Smoke

Arbogasts like to sell their calves through the Tel-O-Auction at their

local stockyard. When they have a tractor trailer’s worth of both black and smokey calves ready, the local auction personnel will come take pictures of them a few days before the sale and post the photos to the auction’s website. On the day of the sale, buyers from across the country can bid on the cattle. Once sold, the cattle are loaded and shipped out.

“Generally the guys that are buying over the telephone are the large feedyards, and they’re all buying by the tractor-trailer load. Your cattle are worth a few cents more per pound if you can sell them by the truckload and on the Tel-O-Auction,” Arbogast explains.

Arbogast has been pleased with how their cattle have sold on the Tel-O-Auction and attributes some of their consistency to the relationship they have developed with stockyard owner, Mr. Chambers.

“He’s got buyers all over the country,” says Arbogast. “He truly finds a home for them.”

Any calves that aren’t sold through the Tel-O-Auction are hauled to the local sale yard and sold in the ring.

In all the years that Arbogasts have been marketing cattle, 2013 was the first year one of their lots ended up staying local. The sold calves were grazed on summer mountain grass close to a farm Arbogasts rented for their own cattle. About once a month, when Arbogasts would check their cattle, they would drive past the yearlings.

“Being able to see those cattle and see what they were doing, it was pleasing to us,” states Arbogast.

The buyer was so impressed with how the cattle performed, he tried to buy another load in 2014. But, pricewise, Arbogast’s cattle were too high and he couldn’t get involved.

Currently no carcass traits or performance data is coming back from the calves in the feedlot. But Arbogast says that is something the operation is working toward. He says retaining ownership on a couple loads a year is really the goal they are shooting for within the next few years.