

Master Crafter

Five years ago craft butcher Ben Buchanan launched *United Fields*, a business that provides mobile processing, teaching and consulting. Early on, while he was still fine-tuning his craft, he toured *Callicrate Cattle Company* and *Ranch Foods Direct* to study the components of the pasture-to-plate model. More recently, he returned in a professional capacity to provide consulting and training services to the company. Here's more about how his craft turned into a calling.

HOW DID YOU FIRST BECOME ACQUAINTED WITH MIKE CALLICRATE AND RANCH FOODS DIRECT?

We are both on the board of a group called Farm Action. But I knew about him before that because of his work with mobile slaughter. I was building my own mobile unit back home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, so I contacted him about coming to check out his unit and pick his brain. That was in 2020. After that, it was off to the races for me. I went back home to build out my own unit and now I'm in the process of getting a larger unit up and running.

ANY EARLY EXPERIENCES THAT HELPED SHAPE YOU?

I've been into long-distance biking since I was old enough to ride. In the spring of 2007, I gave away most of my stuff, ran out the lease on my place, hopped on my bike and started riding across the Appalachian Mountains. I stopped at my buddy's in West Virginia and we made jerky I could use as currency for my 9-month trip.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO CRAFT BUTCHERING?

In 2003, when I was around 18 or 19, I was working at a convenience store and not making much money. My girlfriend at the time told me the slaughterhouse down the road was hiring. It was just a job at first, but I've always had a chip on my shoulder for doing hard stuff. So, I just stuck with it and learned from anybody I could, including working with the old-timers who had been doing it their whole life and picking up best practices from them. I treated it like a professional sport, just trying to be the fastest and cleanest, and eventually I got really good at it.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE MOBILE PROCESSING?

I'd been working at a meat plant for six years or so when Covid hit, and that turned the meat industry on its head. I'd already been building a mobile rig leading up to that point, with whatever time I had on the weekends. But that convinced me to double down and actually get it up and running. That's when I started my company using seed investment from outside sources. Originally, I thought I would mainly be a mobile butcher. But as I got out more and talked to more farmers, I realized how much of a skills gap there is in the industry. That's when I decided to lean into training and workforce development. I developed the first meat-cutting apprenticeship in Pennsylvania, partnering with a nonprofit that upskills people for work in the restaurant and food industry. They loved my intro-to-butchering class so much that they wanted to build on it. Eventually we got a retail shop up and running, and I'm hoping to use that as a springboard to raise the funds to develop a full-scale apprenticeship center. I have the business plan and facility design ready, I just need to put the rest of the pieces together.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO DO THIS WORK?

The challenge is what got me to stick with it over the years, but it's also just really rewarding to feed wholesome food to people and, of course, you're always the life of the party wherever you go, because you're always bringing the fresh bacon and cool stuff like that. Also, since I came up learning from some of the old-timers, I know there's not many people following in their shoes, and I don't want to see the trade die out.

TALK ABOUT YOUR WORK WITH SMALL PLANTS.

I've got clients all over the country who hire me to do efficiency audits, safety training, workforce development, and sometimes even pinch-hit for them as plant manager. The number one challenge for small plants by far is not having enough skilled labor. That's why I want to start a dedicated apprenticeship center and send trained butchers out all across the country.

WHAT'S YOUR OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE?

I feel like the tide is turning, in terms of the general mindset when it comes to the education system and career aspirations. The idea of going to college and getting a degree is waning, and the skilled trades are ascending, which is helpful to our industry. I have a lot of hope for today's youth. Everyone wants to talk about how they don't want to work and are stuck on their phones all the time. But I've seen kids in their late teens gun-ho to learn a trade and getting very good at it. So that's promising.

