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business

## Steamboat Springs entrepreneur goes from T-shirts to T-bones

By Jason Blevins  
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STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — Ryan Wood hustles through the weathered barns and cabins on his Sweetwood Ranch, pointing out century-old ladders and floors well-worn by countless shuffling boots.

"I'm a sucker for this old stuff," he says in a restored log cabin that once served as a post office at a gold mining camp near his ranch outside Steamboat Springs.

Wood, who co-founded Under Armour apparel and briefly played fullback for the Dallas Cowboys, is taking his passion for Western heritage and his talent for marketing to the country's beef industry.

"Just like we took the T-shirt and made it better at Under Armour, we are taking a commodity product and making it exciting again," said Wood, who prodded an unknown T-shirt company to nearly \$1 billion in sales in a decade. "I don't think there is anything more American than beef, except maybe rock 'n' roll. We want to put a cool spin on a historic American product. We want people to think they are getting a little more than a steak when they buy Sweetwood. Like maybe they are getting a little piece of the American West."

From the warren of weathered ranch houses on the banks of the Elk River, Wood is elevating all-natural, hormone- and antibiotic-free artisan American beef with an upscale Omaha Steaks-type home-delivery strategy. Raised on the Yampa Valley's lush grasses, finished with heaps of grain and watered with a proprietary sugar beet and spice mixture, his Sweetwood Cattle Co. cows are stirring a \$74 billion American retail beef industry threatened by declining domestic demand and a global beef economy.

Beef is boring — a commodity that has lost its connection to Americans as merely countless trays of plastic-wrapped pink in a chilly grocery aisle.

The T-shirt was once just as boring, Wood says. But some innovative branding of higher quality product pushed Under Armour to \$700 million in annual sales when he left the company in 2007. Last year the company topped \$1 billion dollars in sales.

### The spark for Sweetwood

Three years ago — on 652 acres of historic riverside ranchland where the 39-year-old Loveland native was initially planning to retire with his wife and raise a clan of fishing, skiing, hunting and outdoorsy Woods in the woods — he

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felt that same spark that helped launch Under Armour in the late 1990s.

"Beef and agriculture are important for our culture," he says. "The minute our country or our leaders say it's OK to let agriculture move somewhere else — when we quit making our own food — I think we have a real problem."

Wood raises as many as 2,000 cattle on his Sweetwood ranch and at other pastures around Colorado. During busy times — like around the holidays, when his Sweetwood gift packs are popular — Wood partners with other natural ranchers for more beef production.

With a host of new beef products, the former sweaty fullback-turned-cowman is watching business explode.

Sales are up 70 percent from last year. Since starting, he has sold \$500,000 worth of Sweetwood beef. That is a drop in the bucket in Colorado, where beef eaters spend \$1.8 billion a year on their meat, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics on beef consumption.

But it's a growing drop, and there's more than just beef behind Sweetwood. Wood carefully restored two miles of riverfront along the Elk River. He's practicing sustainable ranching with earth-friendly techniques. Sweetwood was the first Colorado ranch to be "certified green" by the USDA in 2009 and one of only two in the nation two years ago.

Along with a litany of habitat improvements, Wood has locked up 455 acres of his ranch in a conservation easement that prohibits development and keeps the land agriculturally based. That's a big move: The land, only five minutes from downtown Steamboat Springs, is increasingly eyed for luxury homes.

"No matter how much he makes from beef production, it won't compete with how much he could get for that land for development, so it's a

sizable commitment on his part," says Chris West, executive director of the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, which holds the easement. "This keeps that land open for agriculture down the road. It will always produce food for people to enjoy."

Wood didn't take long transitioning from Europe-based marketing executive to modern-day frontiersman. Dressed in a black Under Armour T-shirt and blue jeans, he stomps through the small cabin where he lived with his wife shortly after acquiring the ranch a few years ago. In the cozy cabin's antique bathtub, his wife gave birth to his son in 2009. They huddled around the century-old manger and the woodstove during a snowstorm in the days afterward.

"A really neat, special time," Wood says.

## Vermont an inspiration

This summer Wood spent a week in Vermont at a well-known farm that sells a host of state products: cheeses, syrups, bacon, sausage and ham, all from Vermont.

Wood was inspired.

"I see 200 different Sweetwood products we can

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add to our core steak product," he says, grabbing a bottle of Colorado Straight Bourbon from Palisade's Peach Street Distillers, an example of small, niche brands finding a foothold in a market dominated by behemoths. "I think people are increasingly connecting to these local brands."

Sweetwood now joins a host of entrepreneurs in Steamboat Springs, from bike and boat makers to tent designers and clothing manufacturers, all of whom fuel the innovative vibe that electrifies the city.

"Our local businesses have been very good about putting Steamboat Springs on the map as a town which inspires business owners to utilize the valley's resources and, as a result, produce high quality products," says Michelle Krasilinec of the Steamboat Springs Chamber Resort Association. "Sweetwood Cattle Co. is the perfect example of this and fits our Western heritage."

Wood is already into expansion. His Sweetwood beef jerky — MSG-free and packed in a pouch meant to mimic a leather satchel — is on shelves in 100 stores. He muses: Why not whiskey, rubs, sauces and spices? His Western-themed shirts and caps are popular among buyers who order his cases of delivered-to-the-door beef.

Today he's sculpting plans for a guest ranch where visitors could come and "experience the Sweetwood brand firsthand." But county commissioners last spring rejected the Napa Valley winery-type bed-and-breakfast proposal because potential events such as weddings didn't fit the county's regulations for guest ranches. Wood is brushing off the setback and "just focusing on the brand right now."

Like his 24-ounce Widowmaker Ribeye, which sells for a stout \$35.

"I bet Cargill wouldn't name their biggest steak Widowmaker," he says with a laugh. "We're trying to not take ourselves too seriously and have

some fun."

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