

From start to finish

A desire to see his cattle through the abattoir led Chris Balazs to co-found high-end beef company Provenir.

STORY BRON WILLIS PHOTOS JAYNE NEWGREEN



Provenir co-founder Chris Balazs. OPPOSITE: Provenir's mobile abattoirs for killing and processing cattle on-farm.

Fifteen years ago, first-generation Central Victorian cattle farmer Chris Balazs had what he calls a “sliding gate moment” that set him on the path to becoming the runaway success and beef industry changemaker that, in 2020, he and his five fellow founders at Provenir became.

It was 2005 when Chris began to move the first herd of cattle he'd ever raised, into the yards ahead of loading for transport to the abattoir.

“Over the two years I'd come to know those animals – raising them, feeding them, calving them – I'd always walked them along a concrete walkway and through this gate, which had always been open before, so that they could return to the yards,” Chris says.

“But this day, the time had come to sell them. So, I turned the gate the other way and off they went, up the back of the truck. The truck drove off and I thought, ‘Well I'm a cattle farmer, that's what I do. But I don't know where my babies are going.’ And I didn't like it. I was intensely unhappy about it.”

It was a moment that shaped the next stage of Chris's life, including lobbying for a change in Victorian meat-processing laws.

Each of the founders brought their own strength to Provenir, including a veterinarian, a chef, a barrister (whose skills came in handy during the lobbying process) and a marketer. Early funding through a SproutX AgTech program

soon moved the idea closer to reality. The founders then secured seed funding from private investors who took an interest in Provenir's ethical approach and some of whom were themselves farmers. Co-funding for research and development from Meat and Livestock Australia, together with a crowdfunding campaign to secure early sales of meat packs, found Provenir ready for launch in 2019.

Provenir was then able to offer customers something that Chris had come to treasure himself: high-quality beef that had been killed and processed in the same careful way it was raised. “A couple of years after I first started farming, I processed one of my own cows on the farm and found that the quality of the meat was so superior,” he says.

The elimination of the stressful journey to the abattoir and the experience at the abattoir meant better-quality and better-tasting meat, as well as better yield and financial return, completing the cycle of care, from birth to death, on the farm.

Chris has since found out he was not the only one lamenting the narrow options for slaughtering and processing. In creating Provenir, Chris tapped into a huge market of consumers and farmers who were similarly concerned.

“We've had literally hundreds of farmers, from outback stations to urban farms, contact us saying, ‘We want to be a part of this. We've looked into doing this ourselves but we just thought it wasn't possible – to change the law, to make it profitable.’ The mountain seemed too high.”

The ‘mountain’ farmers refer to is the arduous journey >

Provenir undertook to lobby for a change in laws that had prevented farmers from slaughtering animals on their farms for commercial purposes. It took five-and-a-half years.

But now that Provenir are free to process meat on-farm in both Victoria and NSW, the company has received a huge demand from consumers: since their product went to market, the company is selling 6–7 tonnes of beef per week from around 30 farms, to more than 50 retail stores and 25 restaurants, as well as direct to consumers online.

Animal welfare is a key driver at the core of Provenir's business model, but it's not the only one. The company also started with a desire to produce the best-tasting meat in Australia.

"When animals dehydrate themselves as part of the stress response during transport, it depletes the moisture in the muscle," Chris says. "And that muscle is what we eat."

Traceability and sustainability are also important. Customers can scan a QR code to view a photo of the farmer and read about the place where the beef they are eating was raised.

Many of Provenir's farmers are regenerative farmers who rehabilitate and improve a farm's ecosystem through their farming practices. Chris says consumer interest in meat from these farms is high. He also considers this point in time as an "interesting juncture as we get more science on regenerative farming and the impact of cattle on the landscape".

"The cow may turn from the villain into the hero in the process of regenerative farming," says Chris, emphasising that cattle can create a carbon-negative or a carbon-positive impact, depending on the farming system.



Australia's best-tasting beef is Provenir's aim. BELOW: Chris Balazs with regenerative farmer Gillian Sanbrook and chef Mark LaBrooy.

In 2019, when Chris first guided his cows up the ramp on his farm, straight to the back of the Provenir truck and mobile abattoir, he could give his cattle the end-of-life experience he desired. "For me it was really emotional," he says. "It's a bizarre thing to say I was so happy to have my animals killed but I really was so happy to ensure they would never have to leave the farm. They were born on the farm, they died on the farm."

