

Waigroup genetics meet the needs of organic beef producers

After forty years of breeding Angus cattle, Ian and Margaret Mills of Ballanee Angus recently moved to adopt farming practices that make the most of leading biological knowledge and techniques with the aim of producing top quality organic beef.

Balanee Angus is situated in West Gippsland around 100km west of Melbourne where it produces a combination of Angus seedstock and organically produced beef.

The Mills believe that their success in producing an outstanding organic beef product hinges on combining advanced management techniques with carefully selected Angus genetics.

Though still a niche market, demand for organic beef is increasing. The Mills are clear that to meet the exacting standards of this market, they need to get the genetics right.

“Without the right genetics there can be no meat quality,” says Ian.

Ian’s aim is to produce high volumes per hectare of a high quality beef product at a low cost of production.

How efficiently a cow herd can convert available resources to a high value product is the key to improving the bottom line, as well as to improving product quality, he says.

“Correct genetic selection can produce the desired high volume of product without sacrificing quality, while also maintaining a low cost of production,” he says.

If stocking rates fall too low, costs will automatically increase.

“Keeping the balance is crucial.”

In addition, when genetics are incorrect, cattle will struggle to perform at the stocking rates required to keep production up and cost of production down.

“If the cattle are struggling greater inputs will be necessary, which will lead to higher costs. It’s hardly necessary to point out,” he adds, “that struggling cattle will not produce quality product.”

There is a popular adage that you can feed for meat quality. Ian believes this is not an economically viable option. “Producers need to look further for the solution, and genetics seems to be one course that provides the winning combination of quality beef and low cost of production.”

Four years ago Ballanee Angus began using Waigroup Angus genetics through their A.I. programme. The two main sires used to date are Shalom Waigroup 519/94 and Pinebank Waigroup 41/97, with Glanworth Waigroup 130-03 recently added.

The 519/94 daughters have just had their first calves and look very promising, Ian says, while 41/97 has been used heavily over the past two and a half years with excellent results.



Balanee Angus cow with 6mth calf sired by Shalom Waigroup 519/94

“The attributes he has given us include the ability to thrive in an all-grass environment and to withstand nutritional fluctuations. Progeny can be slaughtered at any age, females are easy care and offer calving ease, efficiency of production and great temperament,” Ian explains.

The Mills run around 100 breeding females, also producing some commercial crops.

Bulls are put to work at an average age of 14 months and remain with the mostly mature females for nine weeks at the rate of one bull to fifty females. In-calf rate is 96 percent.

Cows are calved in autumn and spring. Calves are weaned at around 5-7 months and then fed pasture until slaughter, achieving good growth rates. Slaughter occurs between 9-18 months, depending on supply and demand. Dressing weights vary between 220-320kg with good dressed weight to live weight percentages.

They also achieve a very good yield of high quality cuts, which has a profound effect on returns for an individual animal when an operation is selling its beef on an individual cut basis. Carcase data indicates very even fat cover and excellent meat quality.

“Our results are a testament to the genetics we have chosen,” Ian says. “They certainly work for us.”

The Mills supply their beef direct to consumers and Ian says that Ballanee Angus Beef has become renowned for its stand alone flavour and tenderness. Feedback from buyers also mentions the “amazing flavour” of the non-prime product, such as their mince and sausage products, he says.

The Ballanee operation slaughters and processes all its own cattle, with the exception of females used as breeding replacements, cull cows and the few males used as herd sires in outside herds.

Last year Victoria’s largest organic beef producer, Cherry Tree Organics, visited Ballanee Angus looking for genetics to improve both meat quality and their herd’s ability to perform in grass-based environments.

Like Ballanee, Cherry Tree Organics slaughters and retails all its own beef, focusing on producing a cost effective consistently high yielding, high quality product. Their product features in Victoria’s leading organic outlets – outlets at the top end of a market where consistency and high quality is all important.

As in the Mills’ Ballanee operation, Cherry Tree Organics need consistent, cost-effective, high quality beef – not just red meat – particularly as end-of-the-line consumers are becoming better educated and more particular about product quality. Both operations need to produce consistently high quality product to satisfy the market 52 weeks of the year.

“Without the right genetics there can be no meat quality,” says Ian.

On his visit to Ballanee Angus, Cherry Tree Organics’ principal operator, Shane Blundy was keen to inspect progeny of 41/97. The Mills intend to continue to use the Waigroup bull in their herd, and are happy to share their positive results.

Ian and Margaret are passionate about their farming beliefs and principles. They farm with the aim of producing food of high nutritional value. No NPK fertilizers are used and emphasis is placed on clover growth.



Rising 2yr Ballanee heifer with 6mth bull calf

“Without correct soil balance one cannot produce nutritious cattle feed. Without nutritious cattle feed you cannot produce nutritious beef,” Ian comments.

The Mills are also firm supporters of genetic selection. They have travelled in the USA, New Zealand and throughout Australia, and believe that gathering knowledge and being prepared to learn from others’ mistakes means they don’t have to “reinvent the wheel.”

“Learning what doesn’t work is the quickest way to learn what does work. When you rely on meat quality and flavour – and the percentage of high value cuts – for your profit, you quickly learn which genetics do not work.”

Ian is a proponent of not only organics but of slaughtering and marketing your own cattle: “It’s the best way to advance,” he says.



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