



Beef cattle: Minnamurra Pastoral Company beefs up with Speckle Park

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July 5, 2017 12:00am

THE late afternoon sun bounces off the rolling hills of the NSW Liverpool Range as Dennis Power walks through a mob of heifers.

“Look at that one there,” Dennis said, pointing. “Check out the length on her. That’s what it’s all about.”

From this gesture it is abundantly clear the committed Angus man is excited about the potential of the Speckle Park, a breed he first noticed on a trip to Canada in 2011 and one that is helping transform the beef farming landscape of Minnamurra Pastoral Company.

“They are a very similar animal to the Angus but just with that little more dressing percentage and the marbling is incredible,” he said.

Founded by the Reid family in 1974, Minnamurra Pastoral Company runs a herd of about 3500 predominantly Angus breeding cows across 118,510ha of owned and leased country over three districts in two states

Dennis, Minnamurra's general manager, said the bulk of the Angus herd, based on Te Mania bloodlines from Mortlake in Victoria, was run over an aggregation of seven properties east of Mudgee. A further 105,000ha of leased land at Cunnamulla, in Queensland, runs 1000 breeding cows.

But today, we are at the company's 2510ha flagship property, Mount Mill, in a valley of the Liverpool Range at Coolah in NSW.

It is here, on the banks of the Coolaburragundy River in 750mm rainfall country, that the foundations for Minnamurra's foray into Speckle Park breeding are rapidly taking shape.

HOME ON RANGE

BOUGHT by Minnamurra last year, Mount Mill comprises a balance of rich fertile river flats, rising to undulating arable areas.

There are also rolling basalt hills and rich plateaus which Dennis said suited cattle breeding and fattening.

"We've got good hills for your females to be walking to work hard when they are pregnant and we have got about 1200 acres (485ha) of farming country that we're going to develop into lucerne and good pastures as quick as we can," he said.

He said while there was good cover across the property, he would not knock back 20-30mm of rain soon.

Minnamurra will soon embark on an aerial spraying program to combat broadleaf weeds, mustard weed and thistles in some of the hilly country.

"It's no use pouring fertiliser into this country if you're going to feed broadleaf weeds and with the plane and MCPA (herbicide) it costs you about \$22-\$23 a hectare," Dennis said.

"In this day and age, that's not even 8kg of beef per hectare that you've got to make. When you've got weeds that are sapping your moisture and sucking your nutrients ... it's pretty cheap."

BLACK AND WHITE

DENNIS came across the Speckle Park, a breed native to the Canadian Saskatchewan province, while wandering through the cattle pavilion of the Calgary Stampede six years ago.

“They really took my eye,” Dennis said, noting their distinctive white, black and grey hide. “They are a British-bred animal and I couldn’t believe the carcasses on them.

“I got talking to people who said the meat eating quality and the marbling quality in them was just unbelievable.”

On return to Australia, he followed up the results of the breed in the Calgary carcass competition. He found the champion Speckle Park steer “dressed at an incredible rate of something like 70 per cent”.

“I thought, ‘good God, that is just unheard of’ ... if these cattle are that good — if they yield so well and their meat eating quality is as good as they say, they have a natural higher marbling content — they would be a beautiful cross over Angus cattle.”

After discussions with Minnamurra owner David Reid, who Dennis said “had the confidence to go with them”, they imported embryos and genetics from Canada to form the basis of the Minnamurra Speckle Park stud.

It currently comprises more than 250 purebred Speckle Park females and “we want to try to get to 500 as soon as we can”.

A further 270 embryos will be planted this year, at Coolah and Mudgee, on top of the current herd.

SEASON GREETINGS

THREE quarters of the Minnamurra herd calves during the spring and the remainder in March-April.

With the Speckle Parks, Dennis said all genetics were sourced from Canada, through artificial insemination and embryo transfer.

He said the stud aimed to buy a new outcross sire every year or every second year from Canada.

Minnamurra was part of a global syndicate that paid a world-record \$60,000 for a Speckle Park bull in March last year.

Dennis said the Speckle Park worked incredibly well in a crossbreeding situation, and it may not yet have realised its potential.

“One of the things we don’t know — and some of the abattoirs have told us this — is whether the first cross isn’t our best carcass yet,” Dennis said.

“It could be with the hybrid vigour, but nobody has really produced any number of F2s, F3s or purebreds to have them hung up.

“We’re really looking forward to breeding the second cross and the third cross and following the carcasses.”

Dennis said prices for commercial Speckle Park cattle had “gone berserk” in recent years. Minnamurra’s F1 Speckle Park weaners, weighing 300kg, sold on AuctionsPlus last October for \$4.82/kg liveweight. A month later, F1 Speckle Park heifers, pregnancy tested to calve in March-April, fetched \$3800.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

MINNAMURRA is also achieving success with its Speckle Park cattle in feedlot and carcass competition environments.

For three years on the trot, it took out champion carcass in the Beef Spectacular Feedback trial while last year a northern feedlot bought “a couple of hundred of our weaner steers” at 300kg and fed them for 180 days with no antibiotics or hormone growth promotants.

“They were killing them still with their milk teeth and 94 per cent marbled more than two and one of them marbled eight,” Dennis said.

“They were so young to be marbling like that. If we can get them at 450-500kg and then feed them, it will be interesting to see what their marbling is.”

On the genetics front, demand is equally as good. At its recent on-property sale at Coolah, Minnamurra recorded a total clearance of 51 bulls to a top price of \$35,000 and an average of \$11,392.

Looking forward, Dennis said the stud would not shift its focus from the commercial - industry.

“A lot of stud breeders think they need to be telling them what they should have,” he said. “No, they should be going to them and saying, ‘what do you want us to do for you?’ ”