

Douglass name continues Queensland meat tradition

SARAH HUDSON, The Weekly Times

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FOR three generations, the Douglass family in southeast Queensland has been synonymous with the meat trade.

Not just as farmers and butchers, but Glenn Douglass' grandfather even ran the largest privately owned slaughterhouse in Queensland up until the 1980s.

“The abattoir had been running since the 1930s and had to close when everything went stainless steel,” said Glenn's wife Skye.

“But we still have a lot of the original equipment, the boiling tanks for the tallow, band saws and sausage makers, which we have on display for customers when they visit the farm on open days.”

While the butcher shops and abattoir may have closed, the Douglass tradition is continuing with the family's 1070ha farm at Neumgna, which has about 500 Black Angus-Shorthorn-Hereford cross breeders.

In addition, Glenn and Skye run a value-add business HighBrit Beef, using their butcher contacts to process and sell their own grass-fed beef, while also acting as a quasi co-operative for other like-minded local pig, chicken and lamb farms, to sell those farmers' meats.



Stock in trade: The farm runs a herd of

500 crossbred breeders.

And while some of the old traditions remain, Skye and Glenn — who moved to the farm in 2000 and manage the property with Glenn’s father and uncle — have introduced progressive changes to farm management, including regenerative land practices.

The mob’s genetics can be traced back to Glenn’s grandfather’s original herd, with bulls kept with cows for year-round calving.

ON A HIGH

GLENN and Skye chose the HighBrit name for their business in 2013 because they are at altitude — 650m above sea level — and because they chase British blood lines, buying in bulls to accentuate Shorthorns’ larger frames, milk and meat production, alongside Hereford taste, and Angus ease of calving and tenderness.

The herd is grass-fed, but with the area drought-declared for the past two years the Douglasses have bought in cottonseed meal, which they feed to breeders, as well as macadamia meal in winter.

The cattle also get a mineral lick of bentonite clay — with the family also owning a nearby bentonite mine.

Hay is bought for weaners

“But we never give them grain,” the 41-year-old said.

The focus of their farm management is creating healthy soil to grow healthy pastures and as such their philosophy is based around Allan Savory's holistic management and regenerative farming, with the couple also completing a biological farming course.

Stock cell graze for short periods, with Glenn visually assessing pastures to ensure regeneration.

"The aim is for the cattle to only chew the top, not all the way down, so it continues to grow and re-establish quickly," she said.

Pastures are predominantly kikuyu, with areas of panicgrass and rhodes grass, and these are oversown at intervals with clover and occasionally legumes.

Soil tests are regularly conducted to ensure the right balance of magnesium and calcium, with only lime added to improve soil health and no synthetic inputs.

In coming years they want to add chickens to the livestock mix, to help soil health.

"It's not just about soil health, but also water retention.," Skye said.

"We have a lot of run off so our next big challenge is to ensure more absorption."



Some of their meat cuts that are sold direct to consumers.

DRY START

THE property's average annual rainfall is about 900mm, but last year they received well below that, at 600mm.

Bore water is used alongside dams.

The couple also aim for minimal inputs when it comes to cattle health, using the required five in one vaccine for calves, but otherwise few treatments. Because they are below the cattle tick line, they require no arachnicides.

Skye said they were not organically certified, preferring instead to be transparent, allowing customers to visit the farm and holding annual open days in January to invite all customers.

Most of the herd is sold through Dalby saleyards or Teys Australia for export.

Steers weighing 500kg liveweight are used in their HighBrit brand — roughly five a month, although the figure is increasing each year.

Animals are processed at Maclagan and butchered using the Douglass' meat contacts.

“We already had a customer network and a logistics chain so use that for other farmers' meat — the chicken, pork and lamb,” Skye said. “These farmers found it hard to break into the paddock to plate market so it made sense to offer that service, to create something like a co-operative.

“Providing this service also means we're a one-stop shop for our customers' meat needs.”

To ensure no waste, all beef is boned and packaged in cryovac bags, and sold in 10kg, 20kg, 40kg or sides of meat, with extra mince and sausages on request. Meat is sold not on hung weight, but final “fridge” weight.

The couple delivers in their foodsafe van to homes across southeastern Queensland, from Ipswich to the Gold Coast and Brisbane, with about 500 on their customer data base.

“When we deliver, customers enjoy talking to us and want to know about the farm, so it makes sense for us to do the deliveries,” Skye said.

“The van can hold 600kg, but we're soon going to have to get a bigger one.”

The mother of four said HighBrit Beef had been a steep learning curve, not only in marketing and logistics, but also understanding customer needs.

“Glenn and I are natural introverts, so we've had to work at putting ourselves out there and understand the customer. What we think they need can be different to what they actually need,” Skye said.

“Customers can come to the farm and point to a bull and say that would be great to eat. We take for granted what we know.

“Other customers will be really interested in pasture species, others in how animals are cared for, while some just want to know about portion sizes.

“Selling at livestock markets you don't get that feedback. So we love that connection with the customer.”