

Case Study:



Lock Rogers Jr:

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Marbling was important to New England cattle producer Lock Rogers Jr when he was producing for the Japanese B3 market, but it became the key factor in his breeding strategy when he entered the Wagyu business.

On “Dyamberin”, the Eastern Fall property he owns with wife Elizabeth, Mr Rogers has for several years been joining black Wagyu bulls to Angus cows to produce progeny for the Japanese long-fed market. The steer progeny are shipped live to Japan and finished overseas; the heifers are fed and slaughtered in Australia.

“Although Angus are the top-rated mainstream beef breed for marbling, they don’t hold a candle to Wagyu, which have been selected for their marbling properties for generations,” says Mr Rogers.

“On the Australian marbling scale of 1-9, Angus tend to reach around three when fed for long periods (e.g. >200 days) on grain,” he said.

“With the right Wagyu genetics, F1 Angus-Wagyu animals average a marble score about 4-5 – still relatively modest by Japanese standards, where the marbling score goes up to 12, but adequate to fulfill the mainstream Japanese market for marbled beef cuts.”

The Wagyu genetics make all the difference.

“If we were still a straight Angus herd, we could go and buy the highest marbling sires we could find and probably only slightly shift our marbling scores,” Mr Rogers said.

“But if you put a Wagyu over them, you jump up a marble score or two immediately.”

Not any Wagyu, though. Selecting Wagyu bulls with the same eye that selects for Angus or other mainstream cattle can be a mistake, in Mr Rogers’ experience, because outstanding marbling genetics are often hidden in a nondescript-looking bull that doesn’t warrant a second glance.

He has learned to buy bulls from certain genetic lines that are highly preferred by the Japanese.

At the moment, it is difficult to select Wagyu sires on EBVs because the Wagyu BREEDPLAN database is still in its infancy. That may be slow to change: supply and demand in the Wagyu trade with Japan is finely balanced, and the market can be easily crashed by a rush of new entrants, as happened in Australia a few years ago.

Selecting Wagyu sires on marbling alone makes it all the more important to select the other side of the F1 equation, the Angus females, on their ability to counter the Wagyu breed’s production deficiencies.

In the New England’s autumn turnoff period, Mr Rogers estimates his Wagyu F1 weaners are on average 30 kilograms lighter than their full Angus counterparts.

Mr Rogers enjoys a competitive advantage here: his father, Lock Rogers Senior, is the principal of the well-regarded Wattletop Angus stud at Guyra.

On “Dyamberin”, Lock Jnr has been able to utilise Wattletop genetics to put together a herd of fast-growing cows that are the ideal genetic counterweight.

A selected portion of his cows are artificially inseminated with top-ranking, and expensive, Wagyu genetics. The F1 weaners from this process can fetch \$900 a head for both steers and heifers.

The remainder of his cows are naturally mated to his own Wagyu bulls to deliver steers that can earn up to \$900, but less for the heifers.

The other critical factor in determining marbling is ensuring a constant plane of nutrition, one of the rules enshrined in the Meat Standards Australia (MSA) directives for achieving optimum meat quality.

After producing three drops of F1 weaners on “Dyamberin” that year after year delivered an average marbling score close to five, Mr Rogers thought he had his production system under control.

“Then we sent a calf drop out west, where it got really dry. Those calves had a big check in their growth, and their marble scores were pretty disappointing – just above four.”

“The next year we backgrounded the F1s at home again, and their marble scores came back at around five. A seasonal check can have a big effect.”

Ultimately, it’s all in the eating, whether that’s here or Japan.

Mr Rogers said he was always conscious of marbling as a driver of value, but it wasn’t until he began eating Wagyu-influenced beef that he fully appreciated the importance of marbling to meat taste and texture.

“Once you’ve eaten well-marbled beef, you get spoiled for everything else.”