

Vineyard visit creates quality beef

By JACINTA ROSE

FOR many vineyard owners, the prospect of cattle getting into their vines would be a nightmare, but for Macclesfield cattle producers and winemakers John and Margaret Struik, this practice is an important part of their farming program.

Hereford and Angus cattle graze pastures on the 93-hectare property for most of the year, and in winter, some of the herd is allowed into the 6ha vineyard.

"Generally at the end of the season we let cattle out into the vineyards," John said.

"You've got to be a bit careful about that – it's only the quiet heifers that go out there. Your typical Black Angus bull would not walk down the rows – he would walk through the rows – but the heifers tend to move down one row then turn and come back up the next one just like the pruner would.

"I think it's a natural way to run a vineyard in some ways. I know a lot of people use sheep in there, and most people would be wary of using cattle in a vineyard but we're got quite a few quiet girls that are there specifically for that purpose and they also train calves how to behave."

The Struiks started their Bendbrook wine brand in 1997, and began processing and selling small amounts of beef run on the property a few years later.

"We found that there was some demand from restaurants for beef that also came from a vineyard," John said.

"We grew on that a little bit and that's where we started to get a little bit more involved with the

5 Critical Factors

- 1 Cattle run in vines after vintage
- 2 Cuts down herbicide usage
- 3 Chefs seek animals from vineyards
- 4 Extra supply sourced from Fleurieu
- 5 Consistency vital for success

beef brand."

Running cattle in the vineyard benefits the wine and beef side of the business.

"When we bred from the first cattle we'd put in the vineyard we had some initial difficulty because they were so fat, but the meat that came off the ones that had been in the vineyard and had been eating some cabernet was very good," he said.

"We use very little in the way of herbicide sprays because of the cattle. We do have cattle out there for quite a long time – it's only when we see the first signs of budding that we take them out.

"During winter we don't go in the vineyard at all. They clean up fruit that may otherwise have some bit of disease at the end of the season – that's all taken out quite efficiently – plus they fertilise naturally.

"I would stress the point to anybody who is thinking about putting cattle in a vineyard – you've got to have quiet, trained ones. If you've got that then life's a breeze – they do a remarkably good job of looking after every-



FINE WINE: John Struik started his Bendbrook wine brand in 1997, and began selling small amounts of processed beef run on the property a few years later.

thing out there."

The Bendbrook beef brand has grown substantially since its inception, and is now sold to many of Adelaide's well-known restaurants.

The farm is home to 80 breeders and one bull, and John believes his land is ideally suited to cattle production.

"If you're looking for livestock from a pretty reliable area, southern South Australia is probably as good as you're going to get anywhere. There're not too many extremes," he said.

"Being in a southern cool area like we are we don't have too many feed issues. We don't bring

in anything apart from our own pasture or in this particular year we did supplement with hay.

"We generally look for good lucerne clover hay from growers in the area. This season will be interesting – there should be a fair bit around this year, but last year it tightened up very quickly."

Selling branded beef means he has to ensure he keeps the quality high at all times.

"Unless you are dealing with older cattle you really shouldn't have too many issues. If they've been on reasonable feed, their fat score is two and over and there is youth on their side, they should turn out to have good eating qualities," he said.

"The flavour can be variable depending on the feed they're in, but I think trying to get consistency in all your animals is a critical part."

Calves are processed at local abattoirs when they reach about a 220-kilogram dressed weight.

To keep up with demand, John sources cattle from other Fleurieu Peninsula farmers.

"To keep all our buyers happy we do have to outsource some beef, but we restrict it to the Fleurieu and we do try to keep it as local as we possibly can," he said.

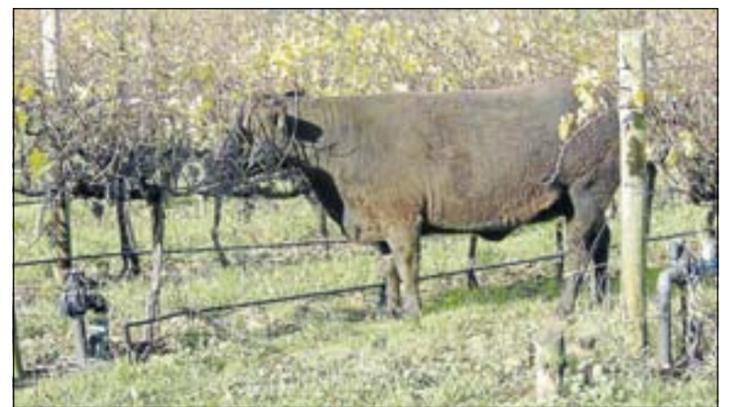
"The others we source must reach a particular standard that we're looking for in terms of age, fat score, whether it's grain or grass fed – we have a preference for grass fed."

John has also begun buying lamb at local markets to add to the brand.

"The lamb is sourced from across the Fleurieu as well as Kangaroo Island if certain things happen how we want them to," he said.



TOP FEED: John Struik says southern SA is one of the most reliable areas for beef cattle production.



GOOD GRAPES: Quiet cattle are allowed in the vineyard after vintage to mop up any fruit left behind by the pickers.



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