

At Mt Mable what you see is what you get



Kevin and Megan Friel prove how quiet their sale bulls are in the paddock.

A PASSION for bloodlines and pedigrees is evident when talking with Norsewood angus breeders Kevin and Megan Friel.

Mt Mable Angus Stud was established at Ohura, west of Taumarunui, almost 50 years ago by Kevin's parents Allen and Maisie Friel, with the majority of foundation stock acquired from the Puketutu Stud.

On-farm sales started in 1986. Kevin and Megan took over in 1997 and moved the stud to the 880ha Pukerimu Station at Norsewood, north of Dannevirke, in 2008.

As well as longevity in both their cow herd and their bulls, the Friels like to see their breeding decisions result in good news on the hook. They had eight steers killed at Silver Fern Farms recently with seven of them making the Master Grade, which takes into account weight, meat colour, fat colour, rib fat, pH, marbling and ossification.

"One was penalised for high pH otherwise all eight would have made the Master Grade," Megan says.

"Although the cattle were below average according to the Angus Pure index, in reality they were almost perfect for the market or for eating quality, which confirms what we have always believed ... the actual performance of our cattle is better than that predicted by EBVs.

"Mt Mable Angus cattle have had nearly 50 years of consistently being selected on type and function, so we're confident what you see is what you get."

Fifty-odd bulls will be offered for sale at the stud's annual on-farm auction on Monday June 8.

Eighteen of the 55 bulls catalogued were sired by rising-nine-year-old bull Mt Mable Fat Boy 373.

One of his sons was sold to the Rangatira Angus Stud in Gisborne in 2012.

"We breed the cows that breed the bulls that breed the cows that allow people to do whatever they want with the progeny – breed them to finish or sell them as weaners – and be happy doing it with as least hassle as possible. We want it easy for ourselves so why wouldn't we want it easier for other people."

The Friels' first sale at Norsewood in 2009 saw 39 bulls sold for an average \$4938. Last year they sold 47 bulls for an average \$7100, with the top price of \$15,000 paid by long-standing buyers Timahanga Station.

Megan says locality has been an important factor in that rise.

"We retained most of our core clients from the King Country and added ones from Gisborne and the wider Hawke's Bay areas, as well as locally around Dannevirke.

"We used to get two sets of common feedback. One was 'We've never heard of you, where have you been?' And the other is commercial farmers saying they're buying our weaners because they are so quiet."

"Even some of the bigger stations appreciate being able to handle them much easier," adds Kevin.

"We're fortunate to have regular buyers who have large cow herds, including one who has been buying from us for 12 years."

One of the selling features of Mt Mable Angus is the larger mob size, says Kevin.

"We now have one mob of 30 and another of 23, although they were all run together as one mob over winter through to about October. This allows a process of natural selection."

The Friels brought 150 cows with them from the King Country. The herd has slowly been increasing with more than 200 calves expected on the ground this year.

They don't have a commercial cattle herd but the stud cattle are run on a commercial basis, says Kevin, in conjunction with 2800 romdale ewes and 700 hoggets.

"Their job is to clean up the rank, rough grass on the hills in the winter, just as a commercial herd would do."

Kevin says the only animals that don't have to traipse around the hills after the sheep are the older cows (over 10 years).

"They've earned their keep and we like to extend their productive life, as the hills are quite hard on their hips and joints. If you've got to that age, you deserve it. Longevity is an important trait for us," he says.

"An under-recognised trait," adds Megan.

"Because our cows run in a commercial setting, it's easy to identify the cows that can hack it and the cows that can't. We end up with the cows that handle it and they breed daughters who can and so on."

She says only heifers that have proven themselves and have the attributes they are looking for are introduced into the herd.

"The cow herd is rigorously culled on performance and conformation. All cows are expected to rear an exceptional calf, get back in calf and return to good condition every year – no exceptions.

"Because Kevin and I farm here ourselves, if there is a more efficient way of doing something, we've found it. We don't have the time to be intensively farming our cows – they either do it by themselves or they are gone – end of story."

Since buying the Norsewood property, the Friels have invested in pasture improvement and fertiliser on the flat land. They have planted 8-10ha of kale a year for the past five years for the heifers and bulls to winter on, as well as some summer brassica (mainly hunter) for lambs, which are killed or sold store depending on both feed and price drivers.

Two weeks before calving, the cows come down off the hills and are fed 500+ round bales of home-grown balage until the spring grass comes, which can be as late as November.

The farm is tough both geographically and climatically.

Several gorges are fenced off with the Manga-ti-waiti Stream on the southern boundary and the Mangatewanui Stream running through the farm. The farm rises from 400 metres above sea level at the house to 800m on the highest hill. Known as Big Hill, those highest paddocks have low carrying capacity, particularly in winter, and that part of the farm is exposed to westerly winds and rain through a low point in the Ruahine Range known as the Norsewood Gap.

"But that also means we're virtually unaffected by summer dry spells. On a beautiful summer's day you can't beat it."

Kate Taylor

- Stuff