

PICTURE PERFECT

Amongst creative niches, East Texas ranch's dedication to beef production is in focus

By KARI KRAMER

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Pierre de Wet said he sees himself like any other beef cattle producer. Still, the uniqueness of his operation is hard to ignore.

de Wet owns and operates what he refers to as the "Land of Cattle and Wine," as part of his company Kiepersol Estates. The company includes an extensive real estate operation, a winery, a bed and breakfast, and 1,000 head of cattle that roam approximately 3,000 of the estate's acres.

It is the cattle that de Wet has poured his heart into. After coming to America from South Africa, De Wet began purchasing land near Bullard, south of Tyler in Smith County, in 1984. With him came his two daughters, Velmay, who helps run the cattle business, and Marnelle, Kiepersol Estates' winemaker.

de Wet said he chose to pursue the cattle business after coming to the United States because it was something he was familiar with. He began raising cattle in 1954, while still in South Africa. It was in 1999 that he started putting together his Texas cattle herd, and from the beginning, he was adamant about doing it properly.

"If it's worthwhile to go in the cattle business, it's worthwhile to go in with the best cattle," he said.

The first step was deciding on cattle that would best fit his plans.

"We first identified the bloodlines that had the traits that we saw as the future needs in the global market," he explained. Those traits included meat tenderness, growth, intramuscular fat, and maternal instincts.

Desired bloodlines were finally chosen and de Wet established two herds: A registered Polled Hereford herd and a registered Black Angus herd.

"The demand for Herefords has doubled in the last five years," he said. When crossed with black cattle, de Wet noted, Herefords often produce black baldies, which he said have been bringing a higher premium at the feedlots.

He said Black Angus cattle are well established and desired. In his herd he has placed an emphasis on body length and premium-sized ribeyes.

"It's giving our bull users about a 15 percent increase in quality and a 20 percent increase in growth," he said of his Black Angus genetics.

Genetics has been one of de Wet's primary focuses since starting his Texas cattle operation. He has taken that emphasis to an extreme level. In 2000, de Wet built an on-site embryo clinic and lab strictly for Kiepersol Estates' use.

"Looking at the global market, and being in seedstock production, we had to find a way we could be producing genetics that we could export in a tube - instead of a live animal," he explained.

Embryo flushing and transfers are now done onsite by visiting technicians (who are able to stay in the company's western-themed bungalow). de Wet (who is certified to perform embryo flushing and transfers) said the embryo work has been successful because he has a planned approach.

He said many who attempt to utilize an embryo program fail because they flush too many cattle, the wrong cattle, or cattle whose offspring will be unknown.

"Too many people flush young cows with too little history," he explained.

To avoid failure, de Wet said he does not flush a cow until she has produced at least four calves with three different bulls.

"When we flush an embryo, we know what that cow can do and with what bull," he said. In addition, by the time the cow is flushed, information is usually already available on that cow's daughters' performance.

"The secret to breeding is to breed animals that you know what you're going to get," he said.

The endeavor proved successful. de Wet now ships semen and embryos all over the world. He has established himself as a leading genetics producer. In fact, he said, minimal promotion is required to keep his business going.

"If you produce the right genetics, most other producers of those genetics do the marketing for you," he said. "Actually the market finds us."

de Wet's herd has plenty of selling points. They are the only beef herd in Texas that is ISO certified (they equipped their cattle with compliant radio frequency identification system in 2003), certified tuberculosis- and brucellosis-free, they are Eurogap certified, and are a second-class Johne's-free herd (they can only buy from and breed from other Johne's-free herds).

de Wet said the certifications are necessary in the global market.

"It's thinking of a broader market," he said. "You don't want to run against closed doors."

He said the RFID information has had a positive affect on his operation, not just for him as a manager (it greatly decreased his herd management costs), but as a seller.

“We've been able to show conditioning and the capability to hold conditioning, calving records, and calf birth weights that are true, not guesstimates,” he explained. “We have always tried to sell what we produce. In a global market, people buy only what carries the right documents.

“We don't feel that there's enough information on other people's animals,” he said.

de Wet recognized it's something not all producers grasp. Contrary to the argument against RFID compliance, he said the system has been relatively easy to use and has provided many benefits. “It's a totally mute argument if you try it yourself,” he said.

Also, de Wet said customers and consumers will take their business where background information is available.

“I think as farmers we have to change our mindset,” de Wet added. “Nobody has to buy our product. Somebody, somewhere, will comply with their demands.”

Kiepersol's ability to meet those demands has helped them remain successful. Still, de Wet said he has had to manage for a market influenced by the recent drought.

“The hardest part is looking at the skies and it never rains,” said the cattleman.

In a normal year, de Wet's cattle graze on grass for their primary feed. Lately, the situation has changed.

“Everything we feed, we had to buy this year,” he said. “But, we think it's a good investment at this time to buy feed.”

Without buying feed, de Wet would have to drastically reduce his genetically preferred cattle, something he has spent years building. In contrast, he said the drought has forced some positive management decisions.

“The drought is also an opportunity for people to get rid of inferior stock,” he explained.

Even the sales of his preferred breeding stock has fallen victim to the drought.

“The drought of the last two years has really made the local market depressed,” de Wet said. “Our local bull market is becoming a challenge - there's just not enough buyers.”

In fact, the drought has had such an influence on the local market that this year's April sale at Kiepersol Estates was cancelled. Usually the company holds an April sale where they auction show heifers and another sale in October where cow-calf pairs are sold.

The auction is held at Kiepersol Estates' very own sale barn on the property. In the past, the sales have been very successful. The April 2005 heifer show brought in more than \$134,000, with an average sale price of

\$2,130. Exceptional heifers can sell for around \$10,000. Still de Wet said he tries to offer plenty of quality show animals for under \$2,000 for those who aren't prepared to make such a large investment.

The show heifers sold at the spring auctions are already halter broken. Kiepersol employs people to train the heifers to lead. de Wet said he believes buyers find that attribute appealing. In addition, he culls his herd of any animals with a bad temperament.

Bulls can be purchased on any given day on the property. Each year, approximately 250 cattle are moved off the property.

The only way a potential buyer can preview Kiepersol Estate's cattle is to make an onsite visit, something de Wet encourages. Potential buyers have the option of staying on the property where they can experience all the company has to offer.

"You have to be able to show people how awesome it is," de Wet said. "Kiepersol is a destination and when you come here, we try to treat people with the same amount of effort they took to get here."

de Wet's business approach has been worthwhile. He is glad he has made beef cattle his focus and believes the future holds great potential.

"We are very proud to be part of this Texas industry," de Wet. "Texas cattlemen absolutely produce superior animals to any area in the world.

"When we recover from this drought, Texas will soar to new levels."

More information about de Wet and Kiepersol Estates and their cattle is available at www.kecattle.com or can be obtained by calling 903-894-9330.

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