



Beartooth International owner Mel Gibson with managers George Ellis (right) and Dan Ellis (left) at their Montana ranch.

CELEBRITY CATTLEMAN

Mel Gibson is adding more than his name to Beartooth International. He is striving for a competitive edge with innovative management, marketing and production efficiency.

Story & photos by Jerilyn Johnson



To be or not to be a cattleman was never a question Mel Gibson had to ponder.

From the time he was a young boy growing up on a small farm in upstate New York this ambitious actor, famous for his roles in "Hamlet" and "Lethal Weapon," has yearned to make a living off the land.

Gibson's hard work and acting ability have paid off. He now owns two ranches — Beartooth Ranch near Columbus, Montana, and his home ranch in Victoria, Australia. These two beef operations, which comprise Beartooth International, share a common seedstock genetic base as well as marketing strategies.

The "men" in Beartooth's management are George Ellis and his son, Dan, who serve an advisory role and oversee the Beartooth operations in Montana and Australia. Their 20,000-acre Montana ranch, named after the

Beartooth Mountain range which borders it on the west, runs 1,200 cows. Angus is the base breed, with Gelbvieh, Salers and commercial crossbreds completing the program.

With sound production programs in place Beartooth International has begun its toughest challenge — to gain a lean beef marketing niche in the industry.

To get to this point Gibson has met many challenges. He's also had his share of good luck and timing. Even his first encounter with Beartooth was quite by accident.

To start at the beginning, Gibson became involved in the ranching business seven years ago in Australia. "I preferred the natural existence and open space of a ranch over claustrophobic city life," he says, "so I went looking for something that would soothe me between making films."

He and his family found the perfect

remedy in northeast Victoria, Australia. Gibson realized that the land was no good unless he put something on it. He soon put together a small commercial beef herd.

"Basically, I started from scratch," Gibson says. "I ended up with everyone else's culled cows and made lots of mistakes during those first few years."

Gibson tended the cow herd, dug post holes, built fence and drove a tractor. Struggling to make it all work he often became frustrated and tired. His drive and ambition to be a good cattleman, along with the extra income from what he jokingly refers to as "his second job," kept the ranch going.

Then one day a neighbor's bull got through a downed fence and visited Gibson's cow herd. The next spring Gibson discovered a couple of nice calves on the ground that he knew weren't sired by his "average" bull. He paid a visit to the neighboring cattleman and asked about the

(above) Mel Gibson inspects a couple of Angus bulls at his Beartooth Ranch in Montana. These bulls were part of Beartooth's sale offering to commercial and purebred cattlemen.

wayfaring bull's breeding. The neighbor replied that his bull's genetics traced back to an operation in the United States called Beartooth Ranch. At that time Beartooth raised Polled Herefords and had a strong export market to Australia and other foreign countries.

Gibson spent time talking to Australian cattlemen and learning more about Beartooth Ranch and other successful beef operations in North America. Then in 1988, while making a film in the United States, he took some time off and wandered up to Montana to see Beartooth Ranch firsthand. As fate would have it, the Ellises and co-owner Vernon Sanders had just dissolved their partnership and were looking for a buyer for the ranch.

Beartooth Ranch was an impressive place to Gibson with its scenic mountains, serene sky and pastures filled with productive cattle. After spending time there he was duly impressed by the Ellises' management style. "Here was a great ranch and cattlemen with a lifetime of experience," he says. "It was just what I was looking for."

Gibson purchased Beartooth Ranch and hired the Ellises as managers. "I would of been crazy not to keep George and Dan," he says with his trademark grin.

The men found they had a lot in common, including an adventurous spirit. They were soon making major changes in their operation. Adding Angus cattle was the first change—one that Gibson encouraged because of his positive experience with black cattle in Australia.

"Angus can walk up the hills, forage around and put a heavy calf on the ground every year," Gibson says. "They give a better return for the dollar and have less problems than other breeds. I've never seen an Angus with a prolapse or pink eye."

Gibson adds that the Angus associations in the United States and Australia are the strongest and most competent of any breed associations he's dealt with. "I place a lot of confidence in the ability of the Angus breed to survive over the long term," he says.

For Beartooth's new international



Gibson took a day off from his film career to study pedigrees and record sale ring bids at the Beartooth Bull Sale in April.

program Angus provides the carcass quality and production efficiency. "We needed cattle that can do the job in a crossbreeding program," George Ellis says. "Modest birthweight, early maturity and moderate size are desirable traits we strive for."

Gibson always had in the back of his mind the idea to try something new and different. He was searching for "a competitive edge" in marketing beef cattle. Soon after he purchased Beartooth, he and the Ellises had the insight to see the growing consumer demand for lean, natural beef. After three years of planning, putting together a cow herd and bull battery with the right genetics, and talking with producers, the time was right to try it. Gibson says they are now in the "getting serious" stage.

"In the consumer market of the '90s, lean beef plays a big role," Gibson says. "We are working to meet that demand. There's a lot to be gained in this industry just by paying attention to consumer demand. Why do you want to raise cattle with a lot of backfat when you can produce cattle with more meat and satisfy the health-conscious consumer?"

The solution in their minds is to create an enterprise that produces and markets lean beef from bulls. Several "natural" or "lean beef" marketing programs have been tried by producers in the United States. Only a handful have made it work. Even fewer producers have successfully marketed bull beef on a major scale. Traditional thinking, handling problems and packer discrimination discourages this practice in the United States, although in Europe and other countries raising intact male cattle for beef is the custom.

Gibson and the Ellises were well aware of these problems going in. They have spent much time and effort in finding ways to make it work. After analyzing all sides of this issue they felt the positives of producing bull beef outweighed the negatives.

Gibson puts economic efficiency at the top of his positive list. He cites research that shows bull calves can more efficiently utilize their mother's milk and range resources and better reach their full genetic potential. Castration reduces gains up to 15 percent. It's also stressful to the animal and increases risk of infection or death.

Although growth hormone implants were developed to make up for this loss, their cost, the added labor required to implant them, and "unhealthy" consumer perception—be it right or wrong—are enough to convince Beartooth to try an alternative practice.

Beartooth discovered further research showing that bulls are more efficient in the feedlot and on the rail and have a higher percentage cutability and yield of lean retail beef than steers. Bulls have less internal and external fat, which reduces labor and cost of excess fat trimming.

The Ellises believe handling problems can be prevented with proper management. Bear tooth currently has a contract with a custom feeder in Nebraska who specializes in feeding out bulls. The bulls are placed in large pens and kept in their contemporary "pecking order" groups to discourage fighting and injury. Safe handling during processing and transportation is also emphasized.

A group of Beartooth bulls are currently on test at the Nebraska

feedlot. When finished, they will be sent to a packing plant for processing. Then the carcasses will be marketed to a supermarket chain in California. Beartooth has already done some consumer test marketing with favorable feedback.

Back on the ranch, George, Dan and their staff are currently working to develop the Beartooth Meats Calf Buy-Back program. This cooperative program will help build their supply of bull calves and utilize the predictable genetics of Beartooth bulls. Gibson and the Ellises have established four goals for this program:

- To provide both the commercial cowman and consumer a value-added program.
- To produce a consistent high quality, leaner beef product without artificial hormones or continuously fed antibiotics.
- To provide a fair market to producers for bull calves (no discounts).
- To allow flexibility in pricing feeder cattle, providing producers several marketing alternatives.

As a participant in the Buy-Back program, producers will first have the opportunity to sell their intact bull calves for steer calf prices. The steer calf price can be set any time between the contract date and delivery time. These prices will be determined by using one of the following five available contracts— cash forward contract, basis contract, minimum price agreement, or a retained ownership agreement.

For Gibson, working with producers, feedlots, packers and retailers to produce a quality beef product is a worthwhile challenge. “The thing I enjoy most about ranching is seeing the outcome of our genetic experiments. I think it’s really stimulating. Seeing a newborn calf, recording its birthweight, monitoring its growth, and following its performance in the pasture, on the rail or in the show ring — it all interests me,” Gibson says.

“I take my hat off to producers who make their living from the land and livestock. It’s very tough. Cattle people are nice to work with. I like to get ‘silly’ with them once in a while, but I hope they take my cattle business side seriously. I’ve learned a thing or two these past few years.”

