

Paradise Found

A dream lives on in Northern California cattle country.

Story & photos by **Anthony Pannone**



Orange, yellow and white sunrays pierce coastal pines, casting golden hues on black hides as cattle meander ankle-deep pasture. Noses twitch as hints of the Pacific Ocean waft from the west. Tails and ears flirt with the cool, soft breeze.

Just 35 miles separate San Francisco from Olema, Calif. Though the road in between twists and turns, U2 Angus Ranch owner Barbara “Bobi” Hall follows a strict and straight management path. It leads to commercial and genetic excellence.

Born and raised in Olema, she says, “It’s a one-horse town.” Hall inherited the herd from her father, Louie Bloom, who began leasing land in the 1940s. “We had Hereford cattle to start with,” she says, then chuckles, “but don’t tell anyone.”

The switch to black cattle happened because her father was always “one step ahead of what was happening. I think my dad just knew that was the way to go,” Hall says. “He put together an awesome herd.”

Riding through them horseback as a preference to in a pickup truck, she says she once believed the rap that Angus were “mean and wild.” But as she saw the black herd take shape, she realized, “That’s definitely not true. They are good mothers, and, yeah, they do cover every bit of land, which I think is good. They don’t sit around the hay barn, they get out and go.”

Part of that comes from cattle well-adapted to the region. Bloom bought bulls from Oak Ridge Angus in Calistoga, Calif., for 31 years in a row, with Powerplay sons in a foundation role. “The genetics are there,” Hall says. “My dad every year at Oak Ridge bought the top-selling bull.”

She has continued to deal with the seedstock farm for the past 15 years, and owner Cheryl La Franchi says, “Barb does homework and knows exactly what she wants.”

A gentle touch

The 200 registered and commercial Angus cows divided evenly among five ranch pasture sites know what they want, too. With access to terrain that varies from tree-ringed lowlands to windswept hillsides with a 360-degree view of ridges, lakes and the Pacific coastline, cattle enjoy ocean-front property without Hollywood hype.

Rye, oats and clover comprise all the pastures. “They’re great for putting weight on,” Hall says. Last year, after selling the top 20 bulls, 70 steers averaged 878 pounds (lb.). Likewise, after pulling the top 30 for replacements, feeder heifers averaged 753 lb. U2 calves are weaned at 9 to 10 months of age, and they hold onto their hair because of the temperate weather.

“This is paradise,” Hall says. Oh,

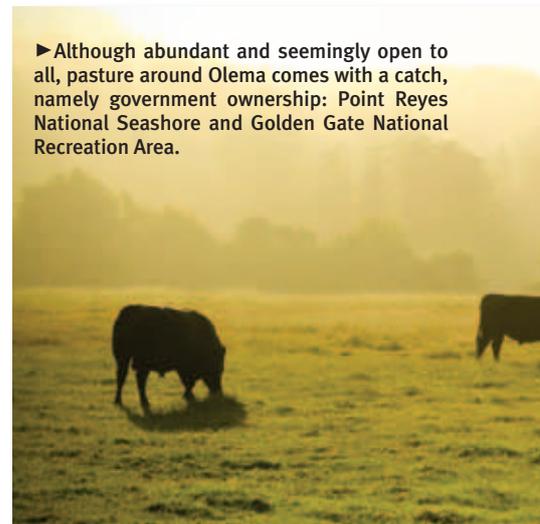
sometimes in the summer there are two or three 90° days, made worse by humidity, but those are rare.

When pastures begin to dry up later in the season, she puts out a liquid protein and mineral supplement to keep the herd happy. Few other 200-cow ranch operators so openly wear their care on their sleeves: “They’re not my cows,” she says. “They’re my babies.” And when she calls, they listen like believers.

“C’ m-o-o-o-o-on, babies!”

Hall’s summons works every time because, as soon as a calf is born, it begins

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to realize somebody cares for the herd. That somebody reinforces caring by providing a little grain treat from time to time, especially for the young bulls. “From the get-go, I give them a little bit of grain every day, to gentle them down.”

In fact, disposition will always be a No. 1 priority for Hall. Since she synchronizes the entire herd for artificial insemination (AI), the cattle must be gentle. “I don’t want a bunch of knot heads running around that you can’t handle,” she says. “Or else you’d just be throwing your money away.”

Her bull customers focus on calving ease, so she balances that with carcass quality. “Nobody wants to be pulling calves, so we watch those EPDs (expected progeny differences) and try to keep actual birth weight in the 70s,” she says.

When Hall refers to “we,” not only does it include the spirit of her dad but also her husband, Tom, who works for a local swimming pool company. Her son, Jimmy, who also works elsewhere full-time, helps with the herd when he can.

“She does most of it herself,” Tom says. “I’m a weekend cowboy.”

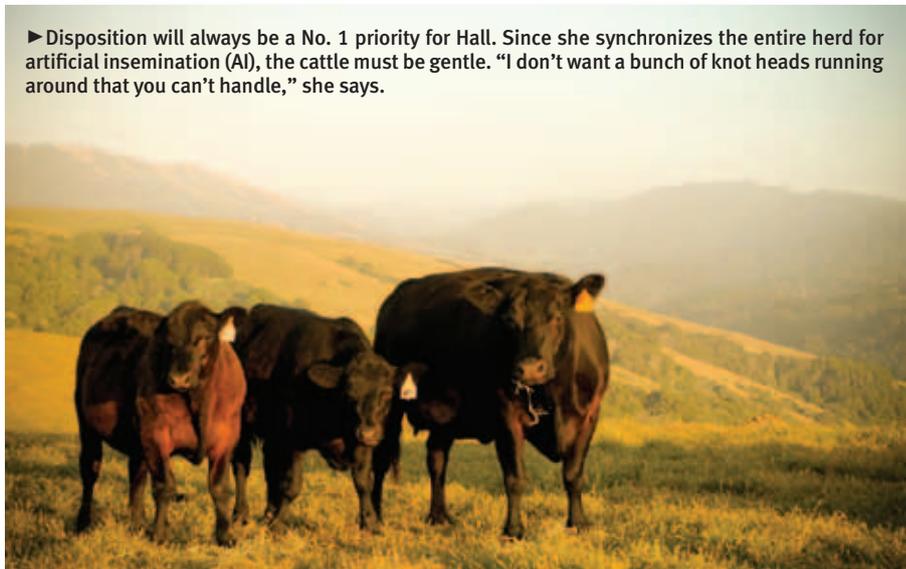
Managing the herd

Hall has the help she needs — family, Angus genetics, nature — so seldom does she call her veterinarian. A comprehensive vaccination program tailored for California combats problematic liver flukes and blackleg. There are zero issues with eyes and, of course, horns. And she never administers growth implants. Add in a devout commitment — she checks every animal every day — and U2 cattle are outfitted with every advantage to grow and grade.

“Takes me all day,” she says with mock fatigue. “I don’t have a life.”

No doubt, Hall puts much of her life into those cows because of the heritage they embody, constantly reminding her of her first hero.

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“My dad was unbelievable,” she says. “He was always wanting to try something new. He wanted to AI, and to sell bulls.”

Tying into that reverence, these days the U2 bulls roam meadows next to a church, where Hall says, “the people are great and love the cattle.”

The cattle, steers or heifers not fit for Hall’s all-star team travel to feedlots locally or in Nebraska.

Recent carcass data collected from the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Chappell Feedlot in the Husker State proves the U2 calves hit the target for consumers.

“I don’t usually brag about my cattle, but I feel like I wouldn’t be fair to my dad not to,” she says.

The feedlot is owned and operated by Tom and Cindy Williams, who are just as appreciative.

“Bobi is not only one of the nicest people to work with,” Tom Williams says, “but she’s very serious about getting her individual data from CAB to use to improve on individual traits. We have fed her cattle off and on for several years, and have witnessed the improvements she has made.”

Retaining ownership, Hall sent 40 head to be fed for the CAB Natural program last year. At closeout, 36 (90%) qualified for the brand, including three CAB Prime. Only two went Select, and only three were Yield Grade (YG) 4.

“To get that kind of marbling without many YG 4s in a Natural program says a lot for the progress she’s made,” Williams notes.

However, this year’s crop will miss the data. “I would still love to have them going to Chappell,” Hall says. But concerns over the market and freight cost (\$4 × 1,400 miles) led her to discuss with Williams and jointly decide to send to a local yard, some 120 miles away.

Despite proximity, Hall says she knows less about her cattle. “I’ve asked the guys, Well? How’d they do? They told me the cattle did OK, but that’s not an answer. I want to know how they did,” she says. The freight decision will be revisited each year.

Heifers will stick close to home, too, as demand is high with local buyers. If she could, Hall would hold on to all of them, breed and then sell bred heifers, but there is no place to do that.

Although abundant and seemingly open to all, pasture around Olema comes with a catch, namely government ownership: Point Reyes National Seashore and Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Noting restrictions on use that hinder commercial feasibility, Hall says, “I don’t think the government wants ranchers out here.”

She must also compete with grass-fed operations, a production method that provides lucrative incentives from perception-based premiums supported by affluence in the region.

Even in a seeming paradise, ranchers face threats to their lifestyle. But here, as all across America, those like Hall who grew up with sustainable practices and still practice them each day know the big picture and the score.

Their mission to supply the world’s leading Angus beef brand with consistent quality starts by ensuring consumers can always tie their emotional bond with beef to their eating experience. Consistency is the key.

“There’s nothing more frustrating,” Hall says, “than getting a good steak one time and turning around next time and getting a horrible one.” That’s just another reason she follows her father’s dream and aims for the high-quality beef target.

