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BILTMORE

BUILDS ON ITS *Success*



*Biltmore uses Angus cattle
for massive farm-to-table program.*

Story & photos by Shelby Mettlen, former assistant editor



*Almost heaven, West Virginia; Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River.
Life is old there, older than the trees ...*



John Denver wasn't far off when he likened the Blue Ridge Mountains to Heaven itself. It's easy to see why Staten Island-born George Vanderbilt fell in love with Asheville, N.C., when he first visited the city in 1888. Vanderbilt's mother was sent south for the "mountain air," the late-century cure for any ailment.

Nestled deep in the heart of Appalachia, Biltmore makes its 8,000-acre home in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina. The French Renaissance-style chateau looks more like it belongs in the mountains of Europe than in those of the American Southeast, but that's what the grandson of famed industrialist and philanthropist Cornelius Vanderbilt was going for when he chose the spot for his 250-room summer residence.

The Vanderbilt family may have lived a life of luxury, but what made Biltmore tick was, and still is, its agricultural program.

Agriculture at its finest

"Our brand is based on the Vanderbilt hospitality, and that's what we do really well," says Ted Katsigianis, vice president of agricultural sciences at Biltmore. "That continues through every operation on the estate, including the farm."

When Vanderbilt commenced construction of his home — the largest undertaking in residential history — in 1889, his goal was to develop a large and diverse agricultural program to provide food for the family, guests and staff.

"George set out to emulate the great estates in Europe where agriculture was an important part of the program," Katsigianis says. "Tenants were expected to consume the food on the estate."

Vanderbilt's original 125,000 acres was mapped out by Frederick Law Olmsted, 19th-century architect extraordinaire most famous for his work on Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition — and perhaps, today, the Biltmore. Olmsted broke out the property into forestry, agriculture, and formal and informal gardens.

Originally, the property's farm was home to turkeys, ducks, laying and broiler hens, pheasants, quail, purebred Berkshire swine, Southdown sheep, work horses and fine horses for riding and driving, mules, and a dairy.

Adding a beef enterprise

In 1982, the dairy dispersed, and it was decided beef cattle should replace the Jerseys to utilize the estate's pastures. Katsigianis, a graduate of Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) and native of New York's Hudson Valley, stepped in and took the lead.

The first 29 Angus cows arrived at the Biltmore in October 1983. The cattle were purchased from Georgia operations Irvington Farms and Cripple Pine Farms.

"Those original 29 head of females are the only females we have ever purchased," Katsigianis says, adding that new genetics are added via embryo transfer (ET) and artificial insemination (AI). "Most of our cow families will go back to those original purchases in 1983."

Katsigianis chose Angus for the breed's moderate frame size, maternal instinct, docility and adaptability.

Inspired by his roots in the Hudson Valley and by Penn State's top-quality Angus herd, he didn't consider another breed. Katsigianis says it was "just a natural thing" to introduce Angus to the Biltmore's beef program.

Pasture to plate

It wasn't only the breed's reputation for maternal proficiency, adaptability and docility that reeled Katsigianis in. The beef produced on the farm would be used to feed guests — and it needed to be good.

"One of the other reasons we decided on Angus and the type of cattle we breed was in order to produce meat for our restaurants," he explains. "Of course, Angus cattle are known throughout the

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Biltmore

ON THE BIG SCREEN



One of Ted Katsigianis's favorite memories during his nearly 35 years at the helm of the Biltmore's Angus herd came during filming of the 2001 film *Hannibal*.

"Director Ridley Scott had a scene that needed cows in it," the vice president of agricultural sciences at Biltmore explains. "So we prepared our herd of Angus cows."

In an iconic scene, Julianne Moore drives her car through a herd of cattle.

"If anyone has been around Hollywood, they know that you have one person on one side of the camera, and 300 on the other," Katsigianis says. "The scene was supposed to be at dusk, so they had this big machine that was billowing smoke; there was all kinds of activity, big white boards and people running up and down."

About 60 pairs remained penned up until about 6 p.m., when a nervous Katsigianis turned them loose. Thanks to the breed's calm nature, filming didn't skip a beat.

"They immediately came running out into the field," he says. "They looked up, saw all that activity, put their heads down and just immediately started grazing."

If you've ever seen *Hannibal*, you've seen Biltmore cows.

At least 15 movies have been filmed at least partially on Biltmore grounds. The estate was first featured on the silver screen in 1956 when *The Swan* premiered starring actress Grace Kelly. **AJ**

Sixty Biltmore cow-calf pairs were filmed in the movie Hannibal. At least 15 other movies have been filmed partially on the property.

world for their carcass quality. We can produce a white-tablecloth product that our chefs really appreciate.”

Biltmore is home to seven restaurants and feeds more than 1 million people per year.

“Our chefs are our customers, too, so I work very closely with our chefs in preparing our animals for processing, determining the cuts they want, when they want them, the scheduling and which restaurants they’re going to,” Katsigianis says.

About 250 brood cows, 60 replacement heifers, 80 steers and five to six clean-up bulls make their homes on the Biltmore’s farm. The steers are pasture-raised on the estate and supplemented with grain before being processed for the Biltmore’s food-and-beverage program. Cattle entering the program are administered no hormones or antibiotics and are Global Animal Partnership (GAP)-certified for compliance with Whole Foods Market, ensuring a natural, humanely raised product, Katsigianis explains.

The Biltmore’s agricultural program today includes the farm’s Angus herd, a flock of 250 white Dorper ewes, a herd of 100 horses, and various small animals including a pasture-raised pork program and free-range chickens for both meat and eggs.

The farm hosts tours for visitors, allowing them to experience the working side of the estate, Katsigianis says. It creates a connection between field and table.

“It’s continuing that tradition George put in place years and years ago of growing our own food and serving it to our guests,” he says.

Managing the herd

Katsigianis and farm manager Kevin Payne work together to manage the Biltmore cow herd, along with a small team of cattlemen.

With the Biltmore 38 years this year, Payne has worked with his share of cows. The North Carolina native completes all the AI work, administration of

CIDRs® and synchronization in the herd. From calving and administering vaccinations to helping set up the perfect shot for a movie or photo, “I’ve done about all of it,” Payne says.

Katsigianis calls breeding cattle a “very rewarding occupation” and is proud the Biltmore herd has been in business for 34 years.

“What’s fun for me to see is that we have calves born now that are six or seven generations born and bred at Biltmore, and I can look back deep into our pedigrees and remember every animal,” Katsigianis says. “That’s unique.”


“We use both conventional and organic pesticides if, and when, we have to manage them, but what we try to do is avoid the problem,” he explains. “That’s why the house is screened; that’s why we’re moving things indoors. In the field we do select crops that are naturally resistant to disease and insects so we don’t have to spray as often.”

Unconventional

Eli Herman monitors the number of reptiles, amphibians and earthworms to ensure the Biltmore’s agricultural practices are safe and environmentally sustainable, he says. Additionally, starting two growing seasons ago, Herman and his team employed chickens and pigs to increase the operation’s sustainability quotient. The animals were released onto fields postharvest — chickens first, then pigs — to scratch and root up the soil, then add fertilizer. Herman found that the practice decreased weed problems and completely eliminated Johnson grass. In one field fertilized by pigs, fingerling potatoes yielded 3 tons per acre.

“We credit that to pig poop,” Herman laughs.

The 35-year Biltmore employee takes his job seriously, but at the end of the day, he just loves what he does.

“I love every bit of my job,” he says. “I love the people I work with, I love working with the chefs. [It’s] probably the best part of my job as a grower, as a farmer; I’m treated like a professional.” 



Ted Katsigianis manages the Biltmore’s agricultural program and started its Angus herd.

Editor’s Note: Formerly an assistant editor, Shelby Mettlen is a communications and marketing specialist for Kansas State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine and Beef Cattle Institute.

FIELD *to* TABLE

The Biltmore began its field-to-table program “before it was cool,” says vice president of agricultural sciences Ted Katsigianis. Since 1995, the estate has been working to raise meat and produce on-site for use in the property’s restaurants.

“It’s a grower’s dream,” Eli Herman says of his job as field-to-table production manager. He’s in charge of production of fruits and vegetables on the estate, but mentions that wine and livestock are also produced on-site for consumption by guests.

“We try to have something on the menu every day of the year that is estate-raised, and as we expand here we’re getting to do more of that,” he says.



Herman is helping expand the estate’s hydroponics and greenhouse project. Currently producing about 10% of the fresh produce budget, he’s shooting for a goal of about 40%.

“We’ve been working on hydroponics for about four years now, just developing production methods,” he says. He’s found that chefs overwhelmingly prefer the lettuce grown in covered greenhouses to traditionally grown lettuce. “It tastes so much better, it’s cleaner, there are no pesticides on it, either organic or synthetic, so it’s just a much nicer product.”

The Biltmore’s system of protected agriculture ensures chefs can count on about 20 cases of lettuce per week, and with more greenhouses going up, Herman says that will be bumped up to about 80 cases per week.

“They can plan their menus and orders more regularly than [with] field production,” he notes.

Herman uses integrated pest management to grow lettuces and leafy greens, fresh herbs, edible flowers, mustards, tomatoes, butternut squash, blackberries, broccoli, potatoes and spinach. That list varies from year to year and season to season. **AJ**

The Biltmore uses hydroponics to ensure a year-round supply of lettuce and other vegetables.