



The Road Less Traveled

When Tom met Sally, they found their own way to top Angus quality.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Plans, no matter how intentional, can only take you so far. Throw cattle into the mix, and keeping them on track becomes more of a welcome surprise than an expected end point.

Sally Donati knows this well. She's had bags packed, even Thanksgiving turkeys in the oven, when the cows called.

"Everybody took vacations," she says with longing. Their November holiday, however, was in sync with husband Tom's artificial insemination (AI) program for the herd. "That was always interesting! It got to the point where my dad was cooking the turkey down at my sister's house and bringing it with him."

That was 25 years ago, and the AI schedule's since shifted. Tom cooks the turkey now.

"It all works," Sally says, reflecting on four decades on Donati Ranch near Oroville, Calif., "and you just do what you have to do."

Or, in their case, a little extra.

She may tease Tom about vacations skipped or dinners gone cold, but college sweethearts will do that sort of thing. Two years his junior, the pair met at California Polytechnic State University—San Luis Obispo, where they studied agricultural business management before saying "I do" in 1975.

"I think because Tom's family had the cattle there, that's why I got through college,"

Sally says of escaping to the nearby hills on weekends to ride horseback.

Finding a niche

Farm kids, he from nearby Santa Maria, she from San Jose, each had grown up with cattle. In time, they'd raise sons Rocky and Chris the same.

"It was all commercial cows at the time," Tom says, even though they had used some AI since 1968, and he and his brother continued after their father's early passing in 1972. "When we started out, we had Hereford-Durham-cross cows. We even used some Continental breeds, some Simmentals, too. They were just a little harder as far as getting the heifers to rebreed. Then the cows got too big, so we introduced Angus bulls."

At the same time, the prices got too small, so the brothers dispersed the herd and the partnership. Tom started another commercial herd in the late 1970s.

"It was pretty meek in the '80s," he says, "so much operating in the red. In order to stay in, you had to make your cattle better; you had to find your niche, your premiums."

Carcass data paved the way.

"For us to make the improvements we wanted to make, we had to know where we were. It was like a road map," he says.

That road map led down a road less traveled at the time, with grid marketing

sparse and carcass premiums only beginning to see light.

"The American Angus Association started this [Structured] Sire Evaluation Program," Tom says. Similar to its function today, interested commercial producers viewed a list of Angus sires in need of genetic proving, along with proven "reference" sires randomly Aled to their cows. The Association would provide carcass data back on the calves.

"That became our map," Tom says. The first data revealed a *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance rate in the single digits. "You see those things and you think, 'Well, we're not going to get many premiums from that.'"

So they changed directions and stopped "picking the biggest, fattest, prettiest replacement heifers to keep."

"Now we knew what we had," Tom says. "We had to find out where we were to find out where we wanted — needed — to go."

It would be the boys' local 4-H projects that would alter the course of the family business for good, but nobody saw it coming. It wasn't in the plans.

"In our county, you can only have a [4-H] market animal for two years, and then you have to expand it," Sally says. "You either have to go to a breeding animal in the same species or switch to a new species."

The carcass data had them aiming for

smarter breeding decisions in the commercial herd, and that was about to cross paths with the 4-H sideshow.

“We were trying to improve the quality,” Tom says. “There’s a big difference in premiums between Choice and Select.” That differential was the catalyst; they bought Rocky and Chris their first registered Angus cows in 1991.

“The criteria we used for breeding our commercial cows we applied to our small, registered herd,” he explains. “We’d raise our own bulls and put them on our commercial cows for cleanup, and as the registered herd grew, we began selling bulls. All of a sudden it had evolved into a seedstock operation.”

The family replaced their last commercial Angus with a registered one last year.

“We found opportunity in keeping registered heifers,” Tom says. For 17 years they’ve partnered with two like-minded ranches to market bulls in their Black Gold Bull Sale in early September.

Yes, there’s recordkeeping, but the Donatis take it in stride.

“I mean, we have computers. It’s not that hard,” Tom says. Plus, it helps to have Sally as “the chief bill payer.”

Nestled hours inland from the coast along the Sacramento Valley, Oroville, meaning “Gold Town,” is an interesting place to raise beef cattle.

“It’s tough because the pasture ground is suitable for other things,” Tom says. “A lot of the irrigated land has been taken out, put into orchards.” Oldest son Rocky oversees the family’s rice-farming operation, but the cattle will always be Tom’s love.

“It’s been a fun game,” he says, “if I should call it a ‘game.’ There’s so much to play with as far as genetics, embryo work and genomic data to develop a better beef product.”

The fall-calving herd (there are a few spring calvers to satisfy customers) was designed to fit the breeding programs of cattlemen in central and northern California. Breeding decisions revolve around light to moderate birth weights with emphasis still on growth, marbling and muscle.

“They’re not just little ‘heifer bulls,’” Tom says of the majority of those sold as yearlings. “We select for enough growth that, after they’ve matured for a year or two on heifers, customers can utilize the mature bulls in their cow herds. They can follow them through.”

Following through

Tom and Sally follow them through in their own way — via retained ownership in the feedyard.

“We’ve always gained by retaining ownership. Even if it’s not a financial gain every year, you’re learning. Feed efficiency and conversion (their cattle typically beat

3.6 pounds of daily gain), you’re gaining knowledge about where you are. You need to know which way to go,” Tom says.

It also gives potential customers insight into what they’re buying. A recent pen went 89% CAB and Prime with 22% of the latter. That’s the payoff when marbling goes in from the start.

“We were instilling better carcass characteristics into the herd and customers were benefiting from it,” Tom says. “They didn’t realize they were looking at the end product of the whole deal when we first started. As we evolved, through results, now customers see what they’ve been getting.”

Like their keepers, Donati cattle are as transparent as the open books on them. All bulls sold in 2016 were analyzed with the Zoetis i50K test, designed to provide genetic predictions and parentage verification. Ultrasound data is offered, too.

“We just want to put a good product out there,” Tom says. “They’re tested. They’ve gone through all the hoops and loops, so when you get a product from us, it’s real.”

It is so real that Tom and Sally wouldn’t put a bull through the sale unless they’d be willing to use it to service their own herd.

“Tom has, I would say, a reputation that people can feel confident,” Sally says. Buyers travel from within and out of state. “If somebody calls about a bull, asks about his mother, he’ll tell them the pros and cons of that cow.”

Perhaps a lot of that comes from a commercial background where traits like fertility, disposition, legs and udders hold value.

“The customer still wants something that

looks nice,” Tom says. “It doesn’t matter how good the numbers are, if they don’t look the part, they won’t want to take him home.”

Tom won’t admit it, but those numbers aren’t too shabby anymore. In fact, Genex Cooperative Inc. noticed them and bought ownership in two Donati sires.

“Sometimes, some bulls just come to the forefront,” he says. “This bull just happened to do everything, ever since he was a calf. He had the eye appeal, the weaning weight; his calves had growth in the feedlot. He passed all the genomic tests.”

Those tests, along with their data, they’re what make all of this fascinating, Tom says. “To look back and see what we had and how far we’ve come, it’s nice now, but how much nicer can we make it? Where are we going?” Those are the things that still cause dinners to sometimes turn cold.

“We’d like to think, at least, we’ve been paying attention the last 41 years,” Sally says with her signature glimmer and chuckle. “Yet there’s always so much to learn. There’s a lot that goes on in this industry.”

So they’ll keep learning, keep pushing, keep improving.

“It’s our legacy to leave,” Tom says.

“We’re trying to make something better. Sure, there are tough times in the market but we’re caregivers to these animals. At the end of the day, if you step back and look at the whole picture, it’s something we enjoy and take pride in.”

Planned or not.

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Editor’s Note: Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist at Certified Angus Beef LLC.



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