

Raising the standard

SANTA GERTRUDIS STEAKS ITS CLAIM ON MSA SUCCESS

BY DEBORAH HILL

The drive to increase eating quality across all breeds of cattle has given producers incentive to improve genetic lines and animal husbandry. For Santa Gertrudis, the results have been positive, with proof in the data and the eating.

In October 2024, Meat & Livestock Australia released the Meat Standards Australia annual report for 2023-24, with eating quality improving across the board, and the numbers of producers and cattle involved in the program at a record high.

Commencing in 1998, the Meat Standards Australia (MSA) program grades beef (and more recently, sheepmeat) to quantify and assist producers improve the eating quality and consistency of red meat.

Based on consumer taste testing on flavour, juiciness and tenderness, MSA assesses the factors that affect those qualities. The parameters assessed include carcass weight, sex, tropical breed content, tenderising method, ossification, marbling, rib fat, HGP use, pH and temperature. Other parameters that can be assessed include fat and meat colour and eye muscle area.

According to the report, the national average for MSA

compliant carcasses was 58.36, an increase of 0.84 on the previous year across 3.88 million cattle – more than half the national adult cattle slaughter.

The ranking of MSA grades is shown in Table 1, with the highest (and lowest) performing carcasses in the top and bottom one percent of carcasses graded.

Table 2 outlines the effect the attributes have on the grade. For example, the hump height reflects tropical breed content; a high impact will cause a lower MSA grade. All breeds of cattle are eligible for MSA grading; however, tropical breed content is known to impact eating quality, with the trait more likely to incur a downgrade in price.

Best of both worlds

The Australian palate and consumer education for better beef in the past 30 years has seen the industry strive to improve eating quality, an environment that has seen British breeds thrive in terms of consumer visibility, brand recognition and market share.

Convinced that Santa Gertrudis should figure just as prominently in the MSA success story, stud and commercial producers Andrew and Juliana Orman are amplifying the message that as a

unique cross between *bos indicus* and *bos taurus*, Santa Gertrudis gives the “best of both worlds for eating quality and animal hardness”.

The couple, who operate at Glenmore, Goolhi, on the northwest slopes of NSW, are using social media, the biggest public megaphone they can find, to display their MSA feedback in a bid to erode the perception that the breed’s tropical content is a natural barrier to MSA compliance.

In an area that has seen an “explosion of black cattle” over successive decades, according to the pair it is a perception that not only detracts buyers from realising the potential of Santa Gertrudis, but also potentially robs producers of the ability to gain production efficiencies and sustainability gains for the benefit of their grazing country.

The “best of both worlds” label which the Ormans apply, emphasises the at least 60 percent Shorthorn base of the Australian bred Santa Gertrudis animal, a composition that naturally improves eating quality, while still retaining many of the resilience benefits that come with a Brahman cross.

According to the Ormans, since arriving on Australian shores

“Andrew Orman with a line of Santa Gertrudis heifers at Glenmore, Goolhi, NSW is on a mission to promote Santa Gertrudis as the complete package that offers gains for the producer and beef consumer.”

from King Ranch in the US in 1952, the Santa Gertrudis breed has had gradual improvements across many attributes, including conformation and younger turn-off age.

They say improvements in genetics and animal husbandry have enabled producers to achieve higher quality animals, in a shorter period, giving a higher return on investment and income per hectare.

“We have been breeding Santa Gertrudis for more than 60 years, and they have gone from a late maturing animal that were quite tall to one that is more moderate with a broad backline with good spring of rib,” said Andrew.

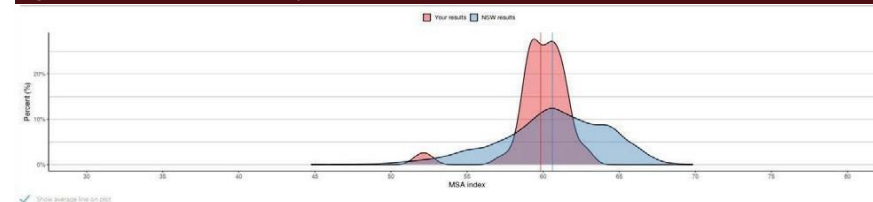
“With that, the eye muscle area has improved, and the animals lay down more intramuscular fat that comes through as marbling.

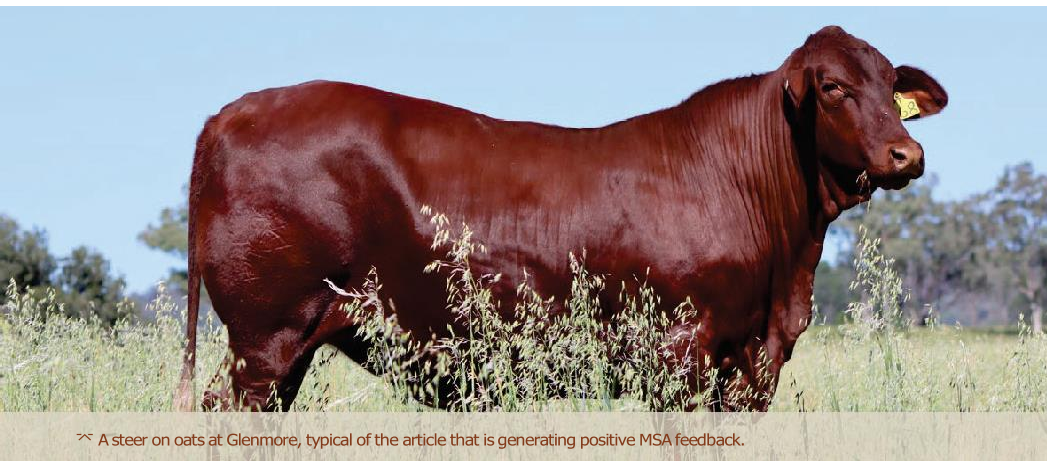
“As the beef market has evolved, Santa breeders have achieved animals that have gone from

Percentile	National Index	Non-grainfed Index	Grainfed Index
Top 1%	68.25	66.27	68.69
Top 5%	65.95	64.02	66.84
Top 10%	64.37	62.95	65.42
Top 25%	61.80	61.27	62.55
Top 50% (median)	58.98	59.36	58.31
Bottom 25%	55.19	56.25	54.63
Bottom 10%	51.58	52.16	51.21
Bottom 5%	49.03	48.99	49.05
Bottom 1%	45.78	44.30	46.70

Carcass input	Relative importance to MSA Index
HGP status	Very high
Milk-fed vealer	Very high
Saleyard	Very high
MSA marbling	High
Hump height	High
Ossification score	High
Rib fat	Medium
Hot standard carcass weight	Low
Sex	Low

Figure 1. The Ormans' MSA results, September 2024





∞ A steer on oats at Glenmore, typical of the article that is generating positive MSA feedback.

rangeland cattle, to one that can compete with English breeds in terms of eating quality.”

He said the 2023 Royal Queensland Show Paddock to Palate results were testament to Santa Gertrudis’ ability to hold their own. With several Santa breeders putting through animals, the MSA scores sat in the high 50s and 60s, competing well with their British or Euro counterparts.

For the Ormans, their most recent consignment of 50 steers has shown that achieving a good MSA result is possible without hand picking the best in the herd. In Figure 1, 48 steers performed

well, with two animals as outliers.

For the 48 steers, the overall MSA score sits between 58 and 62 – aligning well with the national scorecard, despite the tropical breed content.

Moderate frames, big returns

While most Santa Gertrudis herds are based in the sub-tropics – where pasture can be anything from temperate crops such as lucerne, clover, medics and oats, through to tropical grasses such as Rhodes grass and sorghum, the composite nature of the breed with its tropical influence means the animals are foragers

and more tolerant to bloat than their taurus cousins.

“The eye muscle area, marbling and fat depth are typically up around that of English breeds, which is good for the consumer.”

The variety of pasture they can utilise is also a positive for rotations and soil health.

Santas in general terms are good mums with good milk production and fertility, we often see one or two cows looking after 40 calves while the rest forage,” Andrew said.

“To improve our breed’s market share, the smaller frame that comes with the Shorthorn genetics means that we can improve stock turnover with a liveweight around 640-700kg at two years, to give a better return per hectare.

“We weigh the calves once they are weaned, and again at 400 and 600 days, so we can track their nutritional needs.

“On pasture we achieve 1-1.5 kg weight gain per day. Some producers will send them to the feedlot, which they can handle

quite easily as well, gaining upwards of 2 kg per day.

“The Santas will lay fat as both muscle and fat, to give an overall weight gain.”

“The eye muscle area, marbling and fat depth are typically up around that of English breeds, which is good for the consumer.”

Santas the choice cut

Having branded beef underpinned by the Meat Standards Australia (MSA) eating quality system gives butchers confidence and ensures customers have a greater eating experience, according to Doug

corporate butcher with Meat & Livestock Australia.



∞ Doug Piper, MLA.

Doug says that “butchers will not only look for primal size, but also look for meat colour that is a nice cherry red, and a good fat depth which is a major contributor to quality”.

“Too much fat coverage means a loss, because it will be trimmed and becomes waste, and consumers prefer a leaner cut. We know that marbling does make the meat tender and juicy, so a marble score of 2-3 gives the butcher a bit more confidence when selling their meat.”

Doug adds that for the producer, the grading system gives carcass feedback to identify opportunities for improvement.

“Consumers today want to know more about what they are eating and where it came from; for producers that are operating a

brand that promotes provenance, MSA also underpins that brand story to show butchers and consumers that it is good quality meat.”

According to the MSA annual report, 80 percent of surveyed butchers rated their experience with MSA graded meat as very good to excellent, and more than half of their product in store is MSA graded.

The report cites that ‘high quality is the main reason why butchers and wholesalers stock a particular brand. MSA meat quality is considered significantly better than non-MSA meat, and quality perceptions of MSA meat are also improving over time.

MSA beef continues to command a premium, particularly at wholesale where the gap

between MSA and non-MSA beef has slightly increased in the past 12 months.

Back at the farm gate, Andrew says he and Juliana have put their own Santa beef through very rigorous testing in a real-world environment where feedback is immediate and informative.

“I think it’s a very high quality, beef breed; the intramuscular fat that’s within the meat when you’re cooking it, is very noticeable,” he said.

“We often cook it here for visitors as a steak sandwich, and I’ve never had any of them complain about it, they love it.”

“I think it’s a very positive eating experience.” ■

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