

Lines of Angus County | Dunlouse Angus

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For years, American ranchers have dedicated their lives to improving the Angus breed. Legacies are built on it. Lifestyles are made from it. Legends live on through it.

The field of cattle genetics is stronger now than it's ever been. Genomic advancements have made tremendous progress in the last decade, measuring expected progeny differences (EPDs) for numerous traits that have contributed to a surge in cattle performance and, ultimately, a superior breed.

Careful selection and precision breeding have led to the world's most successful, recognized and desired breed of cattle. It's nothing to sneeze at, but halfway across the world, Julia and Geordie Soutar of Forfar, Scotland — which just so happens to lie right smack-dab in the center of Angus County — are doing something different: They're bringing back the basics of the breed.

"What we have is like the basic ingredients of the Angus cake," Julia says. "People have added to that cake and made the cake possibly more exciting and more variable, but if they suddenly find they don't like the end product, if you haven't kept all the original ingredients, how do you go back?"

Well, you call up Dunlouse Angus.

Finding The Originals

For the past 21 years, Julia and Geordie, along with daughter Louise and son Duncan, have dedicated their lives to seeking out the nine remaining cow families that relate back to the original Aberdeen-Angus lineage, and breeding, building up and improving those lines. It's a way of reintroducing the genetics that made the breed famous, Julia says.

"When was the last time you went to a restaurant and it said there was a bit of Charolais on the menu?" she asks. "The Angus name is synonymous with good eating."

You'd be hard-pressed to find a rancher or consumer in the States who would disagree.

Geordie, who initially trained to be an auctioneer, has been described by Montana rancher Harrison O'Connor as the "seed saver," Julia says.

Over the years, Geordie says he kept commercial cattle, but when he decided to "go the route" of registered Angus, he "wasn't enamored" with the cattle he saw.

"They weren't quite what I remembered from my days as a young guy in the cattle auctions," he says, "so I set out to acquire the cattle that were." The original Aberdeen-Angus lineage was on the edge of extinction, at the time recognized by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) as "critically endangered," with fewer than 150 breeding females left in the world.

Working with RBST, a British organization, Geordie and Julia have succeeded in removing the cattle from their critically endangered status. Geordie says they never sold any females, "just built them up," through a combination of live animals and semen.

"Sometimes the starting point was pretty low, but if it was the only one left of that cow family, you had to play the hand you were dealt," he says.

With respect to RBST, Julia says, "We've had access to their exclusive library, because they know that we're working with the totally original bloodlines. We've actually had access to old semen that I know other people don't have access to."

Initially, the idea wasn't a conservation effort, Geordie explains. "It became a passion, almost an obsession, because the more we worked with these cattle, the more we liked what we saw.

"They were very placid, they were nice to work with and you could see why they had populated the world, because they worked," he continues. "They were so adaptable."

Adaptability Is Key

Adaptable they are, considering that the Soutars have clients from the "snowy wastes" of northern Canada to the humid tropics of Colombia.

"We have a customer in Colombia who sends us pictures of our cattle looking out of the jungle," Geordie quips. "You know, they're looking out of palm trees! They adapt to a huge diversity of climates, and that's what's made them so successful."

Dunlouis sells its genetics "literally all around the world," Julia notes. Live animals can be sold in Europe, so the pair often ships cattle to countries like France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Estonia, Portugal, Italy and Ireland. Embryos and semen are shipped to Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Colombia, Argentina, South Africa, Chile, Uruguay, Australia and Mexico, as well as all of Europe.

Where's it all going? Well, says Geordie, predominantly the healthy-food sector.

That's where Dunlouse finds another niche: grass-fed beef.

"Our cattle are not feedlot cattle," Geordie points out. "The American model has basically been designed to consume corn because you had tons of cheap corn. Our cattle ... work far better in a more natural environment."

Julia says their cattle thrive on a grassbased system, adding that their South American clients prefer a smaller, more sustainable system.

"They don't have the depth of soil. They can't till the land in a lot of these areas where they're raising cattle, so they need these smaller, vigorous animals," she explains. "In the parts of South America that we've seen, they're looking for a much more moderate, hardy animal — possibly more so than they are in the United States, certainly more so than they are in the U.K."

There appears to be a trend. Despite the breed's origin in the chilly north country of Scotland, the breed adapts well to warm environments where heat stress is likely, if not expected.

"They're looking for something that works in their climate," Geordie says of a customer from Uruguay. "What proves it to him is how our genetics work in his environment. Our cattle work in a very stressful environment."

It's the same story in Australia, Julia says. One long-standing customer in Victoria, Australia, has been "extremely successful" with Dunlouse embryos, conceiving 11 of the 13 embryos the first year.

"She will say ... when they've had droughts, that she has to feed her native cattle less, and they still finish better," she says, with Geordie adding that it takes Dunlouse Angus about 40% of the feed it takes to finish her other cattle.

"These cattle are as valid today as they were 200 years ago, because they're the ultimate foragers," Geordie says. "They can do the job without a lot of cereal input. Grass-fed beef is seen as being very healthy, and these cattle are the ultimate converters of grass."

Marketing To A Diverse Clientele

From their post near the northeastern coast of Scotland, the Soutars needed a way to effectively market their product. People needed to hear about it. Julia looked to the Internet — two decades ago.

"Geordie was propagating the numbers and you kind of think, we have this great product, but the world doesn't know about it — so what do we do?" Julia remembers. "TNT delivered a computer and said, 'You're on your own, assemble it,' " she laughs. "It was 20 years ago, so there weren't the shops to help you set up a website [like there are now]. We had to go to Dundee University (The University of Dundee) to find a young boy who was innovative."

He must have done the trick, because "very quickly" people responded. Dunlouse's first customers, from Sweden, are still with them today.

"Maybe some people feel that going totally native is maybe a step too far for them just at the moment, but there's always the half-bloods that you can go for," Julia encourages. "You can always buy the semen and hope to, as one of our friends in the States would say, 'Add a little more of the Aberdeen to your Angus.' "

So, what should you expect when you add a little more Aberdeen to your Angus?

"It just sort of brings them down in frame score, fleshes them out," she says. "It doesn't really matter how tall an animal is, the critical thing is how much flesh it's carrying."

To demonstrate this, Julia adds photos to the website, dunlouseangus.com.

"Photographs are key, so that people can see the difference, can see what it is that you're advertising as the original genetics," she says.

The Soutars work with Paragon Veterinary Group to assist with exporting their embryos.

"It's not an easy job with changing protocols, as diseases have manifested themselves in the Angus breed," Julia says. "They've been obstacles that everyone has had to overcome to prove that there are none of those defects in the native Angus. It slowed the process down, but it has kept rolling on through the website. Everyone is connected online."

Keeping Calving Easy

The Soutars look at a number of important traits to build in their herd, but it starts with a live calf. Julia points out that she sees customers ignore or minimize the importance of calving ease.

"These are short-gestation animals," she says.

"That is one of the key elements," Geordie adds. "A calf will grow a huge amount in the last few days before birth, so the trick is to get them born early ... get it sucking the

mother and it will grow in the next 10 days. It's better grown on the ground than inside its mother. That's one of our things — short gestation."

Get the calves on the ground, he says.

"They're full of life; they're full of joie de vivre, you know."

Happy Cows Come From Scotland

Dunlouse Angus cattle must exhibit the traits of the original cattle, while remaining functional and performing well. Geordie says structural correctness is one of the most important traits to maintain in their herd.

"They must move like a Swiss watch," he says. "They must have good feet, good udders, and they must have a very good temperament."

That's another thing American cattle producers can relate to: docility. Farm kids like cows; cows ought to like farm kids, too, or at least be nice to them, since farm and ranch families have enough to worry about. Strong-willed, adventurous ranch kids are probably going to be out in the cattle pens. Ranching families have accepted the fact. Having aggressive cattle isn't an option.

"From a very early age, our children have messed around among the cattle," Geordie says. "Especially our daughter, Louise. She would be told not to go out, and at age 5 she would be out in the pens, stroking animals." Calm animals were key to the Soutars.

"They're just a joy to work with," Geordie continues. "To me, that's a tremendous thing. They have to have all the attributes of this big girth, vital organ capacity, springy rib, these sorts of things, but they're also placid. We equate them to a Labrador dog."

"They're family-oriented, like us," Julia offers.

You know, they're family cows.