

# Absolute adaptation to Africa

By JODIE RINTOUL

IF an Australian beef producer was to look at Nguni cattle the only thing they would probably appreciate would be their speckled hide.

But while the breed may have an odd appearance and not meet many of the requirements of the modern day beef breeds, this indigenous breed to Africa has a special place in the South African beef industry.

The breed has evolved over centuries to be in harmony with the environment and this was one of the many traits which attracted Cedric and Rene Stoch, who farm at Malmesbury, north of Cape Town in the Western Cape, to the breed in 1970 when they were breeding Angus.

Cedric said the build of the Nguni and their softness on the environment, made the pastures last longer.

"They walk on their pasterns, which are soft so they do very little damage to the soils and the environment, which makes them ideal," he said.

The breed is classified as Sanga cattle and has been described more as a respiratory type with conformation more like a dairy, than a beef animal.

Historians seem to agree Sanga cattle evolved about 1600BC in present day Ethiopia and Somalia from crosses between Zebu and humpless Hermitic long horn cattle.

Recent research indicates the Sanga's origin could be entirely African.

The Nguni name refers to the original progenitors of the present day Nguni people, who migrated from north, central and east Africa with their Sanga cattle, crossing the Zambezia between 590 and 700AD.

The present day cattle have therefore had more than 1200 years to adapt to the environmental extremes of not only southern Africa, but also Central and East Africa as well.

During the migration, the



□ Cedric Stoch believes the best attributes of the Nguni breed are longevity, fertility and disease resistance.

breed travelled through areas rife with Nagana, East Coast fever and many other endemic diseases, and have survived seasonal as well as periodic droughts.

This period of adaptation - coupled with other survival mechanisms developed during their epic journey through Africa - makes the breed one of the hardest known to man and worthy of a place in modern beef production systems.

Today the Stochs run 450 breeders on 316 hectares of clover and medic-based pasture, which includes their Tafelsig stud on their 830ha property.

Cedric said there were many positives for the breed,

including smaller cows, their ability to handle the environment, lack of calving issues, mothering ability, longevity, fertility, disease resistance to tick borne diseases, their crossbreeding ability and good health of weaners in feedlots.

"The cows are much smaller than many other breeds and weigh between 380 and 420kg, which means we can run more," Cedric said.

"With the Nguni we can run up to two cows a hectare, while with the Angus, we couldn't run any more than 0.8 cows/ha."

While the Nguni cow may only be small and look more suitable to dairying, the bull is

generally well-muscled with medium-sized bulls weighing between 500 and 800kg.

Another real asset of the breed is its calving ease and mothering ability.

Cedric said purebred calves usually have a birthweight of between 28 and 29kg.

"I have never experienced any calving problems or had to pull a calf, since changing to the breed," he said.

"With the Angus we used to pull up to 60 per cent of the calves and as a result used to calve under electric lights.

"While the calves may be born small they are very hardy and renowned for their get up and go, which is another good trait.

"Two-day-old calves can walk up to 10 kilometres."

Calving on the property occurs from May through to August and then the Stochs try to wean their calves at 55 per cent of the cow's weight, which is about 180kg in January to March.

The cows are also very good mothers and very protective of their calves.

"When predators threaten the cattle and calves, the mothers will round up the calves in a circle and close ranks and drive the predators away," Cedric said.

Fertility is also not an issue with the breed and they show early sexual maturity.

As a result the Stochs run bulls in with the heifers from weaning with the aim of all the heifers having their first calf by two-years-old.

This year they mated 118 heifers to one bull and when they were pregnancy-tested, only 16 were not in calf, highlighting the highly fertile nature of the breed.

The Stochs leave the bulls in with the cows permanently and Cedric said their main mating time was from August through to November with September being the peak.

"Their heat cycles depend on day temperature and day



length, light intensity and food availability," he said.

Along with being highly fertile both the cows and bulls can have long productive lives.

Cedric said bulls could be used up to 15 years and were still mating cows on the property which were 20-years-old.

"The bulls are highly mobile and have a fine leg structure but they have a good jump muscle," he said.

When selecting bulls and females, Cedric selects bulls with a good jump muscle, as it means they can serve more cows and females which have a nice wedge shape.

Cedric said he also preferred bulls which were true to type.

"They also have to do very well on the veldt and we want them at about 500kg at 30 months," Cedric said.

"In terms of females we want them calving at two years, showing good breed characteristics and we prefer to select calves out of cows 10 years and older.

"Basically we are looking at fertility, longevity and trueness to type."

Another trait which the Stochs like about the Nguni is that they handle the African climate better than many of the bos Taurus and bos Indicus breeds and are resistant to many diseases as well as liver fluke and eye cancers.

"They have a lot of sweat glands on their skin which help



□ Nguni cows and calves on the Stoch's property.

with their heat tolerance," Cedric said.

"Their short, fine and oily coat and motile-hide of medium thickness, also makes them the most resistant to ticks of all cattle breeds in South Africa and they also show tolerance to tick-borne diseases."

The Stochs sell the majority of their calves to lotfeeders between six and eight months at 180kg for 15.50 Rand/kg (A\$1.85/kg) but they also sell some after six months backgrounding, at about 250kg, to feedlots.

"On average they have a feed conversion rate in the feedlot of 5:1," Cedric said.

The bull calves from the stud are run on the veldt and not supplementary-fed, to identify the best feed convertors to be sold and used as sires.

The bull calves are sent to leased land at between seven and eight months and run on the veldt to weights between 240 and 250kg.

The bulls that don't perform and are no good for sires are sold to feedlots as bullocks for cash flow.

Cedric said they only kept between five and seven per cent of their bull calves in the stud and sell between 15 and 20 bulls annually for 25,000 to 30,000 Rand (\$A3000 to

\$A3500) throughout South Africa.

While the Stochs prefer to keep their herd pure, Cedric said the breed was very good for crossbreeding with terminal sires.

"Terminal sires, in particular Charolais, work well over the Nguni female as the calf retains the low birthweight of the cow," Cedric said.

"They produce a fawn calf and while they have the low birthweight from the Nguni cow, they have the build of the Charolais."

The Nguni cattle society is the second biggest cattle breed society in South Africa with 405 registered breeders and more than 60,700 cattle registrations, including 44,261 females at the start of 2012.

Along with running cattle on their property, the Stochs also crop 270ha in rotation with their pastures annually and have 100ha planted to vines, which include shiraz, merlot, sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon, chenin blanc and chardonnay varieties.

Cedric said, on average during a dry year, the vines yield about 4.5 tonnes/ha of grapes and up to 7t/ha in a good year.

The grapes grown on the property are delivered to the Perdeberg Winery and on average they receive 22,000 Rand/t (\$A2600/t).



□ A typical Nguni bull. When selecting bulls, the Stochs look for bulls which are true to type.