

# Romagnolas drive competitive edge

We end up with a flat-backed, good framed beast with all the best elements of the Brahman.

A breed with an illustrious history helps a Julia Creek cattle operation meet its market goals. ANNABELLE BRAYLEY explains:

IN the early 400s AD the Gothic invasion swooped down over the Alps into Italy, wreaking havoc and chaos and bringing with it bovines from the Euro-Asian steppes. Subsequently, they interbred with the wild ox of the Italian Peninsula and these primitive beasts formed the basis of several breeds across Italy including the Romagnolas, which combined the characteristics of both major types of Aurochs, the prehistoric wild cattle which were the forebears of the modern Bos Taurus and Bos Indicus cattle breeds.

For centuries the main purpose of these animals was to assist man in tilling the fertile soil, resulting in their evolutionary development towards a more muscular beast. The transition to Romagnola as a beef breed was started in the mid 1800s by Leopoldo Tosi, who selectively bred Romagnola cattle in San Mauro Pascoli on the Counts of Torlonia estate.

Like their ancient forebears, the Romagnola is typically black skinned, and covered in white or pale grey hair but in its modern form, strength, muscling and thickness are its main characteristics.

The first calf produced in Australia from Romagnola semen was born in Queensland on June 24, 1976. By late 1977 the first fullblood Romagnolas arrived from NZ and more live animals and embryos have been imported since that time.

Brothers John and Ross Walker believe Romagnola bulls give them a competitive edge.

They bought Rutchillo, 65km southwest of Julia Creek, in 1988. Situated on the McKinlay River, the 30,000 hectares that forms Rutchillo is mostly open downs country.



ABOVE: Romagnola-cross weaners in the yards at Rutchillo, Julia Creek.



INSET: John Walker puts cattle through the yards.

While John manages Rutchillo, Ross is a practising accountant in Brisbane. The Walkers run about 1800 grey Brahman breeders and in recent years have been experimenting in cross breeding their Brahmans with Romagnola bulls in the quest for that edge.

John originally saw Romagnolas at the Brisbane Exhibition in the late 1980s. The partnership bought a couple of the bulls soon after in 1989 and sold their progeny through the Roma saleyards.

While they liked the look of the product, at the time John found their progeny were inclined to

flightiness and they abandoned the project. Nonetheless, their potential interested him and over the years, they kept an eye on progress in the Romagnola herd in Australia until 2005, when they bought 19 bulls sourced from Matt and Anna Ahearn at 'Bulala' south west of Roma and Ron Pullen at Wyoming up at Nebo.

John explained: "Matt and Ron have both been focused on breeding a better tempered animal and the cattle we're producing now are much quieter, but still have all the other attributes that attracted us to them in the first place. Their colour blends well with our grey Brahmans and

we're finding the Romagnola cross calves are noticeably good bones; they're well framed and beefier. They pack a surprising punch in the branding cradle."

In seeking to broaden their appeal in the market, they went for bullocks that were attractive to the southern feedlots as well as their traditional grass fed, Jap-ox trade and/or live exports out of Darwin.

"But," John remarked, "they don't like humps down south. Using the Romagnolas gives us an advantage in the marketplace because of their potential for growth and pure bred Romagnola bulls over high-grade

Brahman cows delete the hump. We end up with a flat-backed, good framed beast with all the best elements of the Brahman."

The Walkers have joined about 1000 of their older Brahman cows to Romagnola bulls while the remaining younger Romagnola cows and heifers they have retained are joined to Brahman bulls. "The F1 females are excellent breeders, very fertile and very good mothers and they seem to handle our environment well."

"We'd normally grow our steers out but because it's been dry the last couple of years, we were able to sell our first line of Romagnola cross steers earlier than usual to feedlots."

Their ultimate aim is for bullocks, milk teeth to four teeth, dressing to 280-320kg. "This year we're still rebuilding from the drought, but next year we'll have a fairly large turnoff, predominantly cross bred and that will provide real indicators of the success of our program."

## ROMAGNOLA

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