



By Amy Lawson

SPECKLE SENSATION

The unique black and white skins on Speckle Park cattle may be eye-catching enough but what's underneath is really causing a stir among Australian beef enthusiasts.

This new breed was only introduced to Australia from Canada in 2007, after a group of entrepreneurial cattlemen noted the Speckle Park's staggering and consistent results in carcass competitions and saw a fit for the breed here in Australia.

Now, the eating quality of Speckle Park beef is being heralded by chefs at some of the country's most well-known restaurants, giving this new breed another reason to grow and make its mark.

One of the men who brought Speckle Park to Australia is Greg Ebbeck, Speckle Park Cattle Company, Meadow Flat, NSW.

As a seedstock producer, he's

struggling to keep up with demand from commercial cattlemen wanting to give the breed a go and as a partner in the Minnamurra Supreme Certified Speckle Park beef brand, the demand is just as intense from the retail/restaurant trade.

"I've been in the cattle industry since I was 11, and this is the first breed I've been involved in that's demand driven," Greg says.

Runaway winner. "In the early 2000s – when we originally looked at this breed – we couldn't understand how such a small breed in Canada could continue to win the Calgary Stampede carcass competition year after year.

"It was quite amazing because if you put it into percentage terms, way less than one percent of the cattle population in Canada are Speckle Park or Speckle Park cross.

"They had the ability to win this carcass competition in seven years of the past 13, and also won a number of taste competitions at Calgary over that time too. It's quite amazing

► **ABOVE:** Speckle Park beef – destined for rave review in some of Australia's leading restaurants.

how this breed has captured the imagination of beef-eating people."

In Australia, the story's been just as telling.

"We knew it was good but now we're getting product into the highest of restaurants in Australia and overseas, and the feedback we're getting is exactly the same as in the taste competitions in Canada," Greg says.

"I think it's really only starting to take effect now because we're giving a premium for the product to the producer of 12.5 percent above the EYCI (Eastern Young Cattle Indicator), and we pay for cartage.

"It's a contracted arrangement where the cattle have to be at least 50 percent Speckle Park.

"We're averaging around 62 percent dressing rate on heifers and steers, of which they're all MSA graded, and there are many of those cattle

marbling 2, at between 12 to 15 months old – after just 100 days on feed.

“They go onto feed at 8 to 13 months old at 300 to 350 kg.

“Their feedlot weight gain has been extremely good – on par or better than other breeds.

“Our cattle are then slaughtered at around the 500 kg mark, averaging 14 mm fat,” says Greg.

Speckle Park beef has already been served in well-known Sydney restaurants including Neil Perry’s Rockpool, Pony, and Osso Steak and Ribs plus it has been exported to China, Fiji, New Caledonia and more.

“We would get at least 20 enquiries a week from either restaurants or wholesalers or butchers wanting to have the product, and certainly the major proportion of that is coming from high-end restaurants in capital cities,” says Greg.

The Minnamurra brand processed 600 bodies last year, and will ramp up to 3,000 this year.

“Our forward planning is that 2014 will be something in the order of 6,000, and then coming into production in late 2014-15 will be the Minnamurra cattle, which will bring our production to about 10,000.

“In 2016, we’ll be at 16,000 – all first cross – and at least half of that will be produced by Minnamurra.”

Minnamurra Pastoral Company is one of NSW’s largest commercial cattle producers, known for its quality 10,000-head Angus breeding herd, spread over a 43,000 ha operation in NSW and south-east Queensland.

Its general manager, Dennis Power, was first introduced to Speckle Park cattle while on a beef tour of Canada – including the Calgary Stampede.

“When I went through the pavilions I saw the cattle and they really caught my eye, not just for their colour but also their growth for age,” Dennis says.

“The steer that won the carcass competition had a dressing percentage of 72 percent, which I thought was just impossible, and



Speckle Park cattle won seven of the top 10 placings.”

By comparison, Minnamurra’s own high quality Angus herd dressed up to 58 percent, after 15 years of solid work on herd improvement.

Bright future. “I came home and did a lot more research on them and I just felt they’re a breed that will stand up in Australia.” Dennis said he thought there were only five beef cattle breeds that had come into Australia, had really made a difference, and could stand up alone.

“I just feel there’s a real future for Speckle Parks, mainly because of the carcass and taste test competitions that they’re winning everywhere, with a high percentage of natural marbling.

“I think there’s a huge future for someone who really wants to do it right and put breed evaluation figures together on the breed.

“As the breed progresses, I really feel they’ve got enormous potential and a place in Australia.”

Minnamurra has artificially inseminated 1,800 heifers in the past 12 months, with the first lot of 450 August/September-drop calves on the ground and doing well.

“We’ve also embryo’d 168 cows to form the base of our purebred herd,

► **ABOVE:** Speckle Park Cattle Company partners, George Kusely and Greg Ebbeck, both of Meadow Flat, between Lithgow and Bathurst, NSW, pictured with some of their weaner and yearling Speckle Park bulls.

mainly so we can collect some breed evaluation figures,” Dennis Power says.

Osso Steak and Ribs is an award-winning steak restaurant situated in Penrith Panthers Leagues Club, Sydney. Speckle Park beef went on the restaurant’s menu in February after one of their team members came across the product at a local butcher and tasted samples. Owner, Clayton Jude, says the quality of product they tasted was “outstanding.”

“It presented a unique flavour for our high-end cuts that we were looking for, and we were very attracted to the fact that it’s about as local as we can get,” Clayton says.

“All internal tastings have been very successful, with our chefs commenting that it’s the best steak they have ever eaten.

“With the high quality and consistency we have seen early on, I believe that Speckle Park stands to cement its place as a premium breed, we are just happy to be on board and supporting early.” ■