

STUD SCIENCE

TALLYING UP A BULL'S STATS RATHER THAN RELYING ON ITS GOOD LOOKS HAS GIVEN A FAMILY-RUN ANGUS STUD A CLEAR MARKET ADVANTAGE.

STORY **GENEVIEVE BARLOW** PHOTOS **NEIL NEWITT**



Well-bred Angus cattle graze on Te Mania, in western Victoria.

D19 IS A DULL moniker for a bull. So for social outings where something with a little more flair might be required this prized bull of the Gubbins Angus stud Te Mania gets dubbed 'Daiquiri'. He's big, black and handsome but, according to Tom Gubbins, it would be misguided to read too much into the bull's looks. "That's the big mistake the beef industry has made for years," he says. "It's performance, not looks, that really counts."

Or, to be more scientific, it's genotype not phenotype that holds the key to economic meat production. And this is what Daiquiri is prized for. Cattle breeders want him for his offspring, which calve early with ease and gain weight quickly on good pasture. Plus he's got the right-angled hocks that stand him in good stead, a big scrotal sac and at least 20 other traits that make him number one. Tom and his family know exactly what Daiquiri is capable of because they've tracked his kids' and grandkids' ability to produce nicely marbled meat across many farms and in a variety of different situations. And for his talents, Daiquiri gets to regularly visit the artificial insemination centre, where he's pumped for semen.

Such is the life of a prized bull on this purpose-built cattle station at Mortlake, 220 kilometres west of Melbourne. The 1600-hectare station, plus a further 1000 leased hectares, is where the fourth generation of the Gubbins cattle family has set up shop. It's here on a former wool property known as "Woolongoon" that the family shifted their stud 12 years ago to begin their 21st-century venture. And for modern beef farming ventures, this one is as progressive as they come. Known as Te Mania Angus, this family company boasts knowledge and experience accumulated over a century of cattle breeding, a canny penchant for problem solving, shared ambition, a relentless persistence with recording, and that invaluable but fast disappearing aspect of farming in Australia, an intergenerational family that works well together.

The venture and the stud began in New Zealand with stock descended from the first Angus cattle to arrive in the Land

of the Long White Cloud. According to Tom's mum, Mary, the stock came from Scotland by ship and swam ashore to near the family holding at Akitio in 1902. Six years later her grandfather, Frank Armstrong, acquired them at a dispersal sale. Demand for their offspring grew when her father and brother, Edwin and Frank Wilding, farmed the descendants of these cattle at various places on the South Island.

When Mary married Australian cattleman Andrew Gubbins the die was cast. Mary and Andrew would eventually come to own the Australian branch of the stud that Mary's father had started, inheriting – along with the cattle – the stud's Maori name. Mary met Andrew, a Lincoln College agricultural graduate who'd jackarooed in the West Australian Kimberley and in the Riverina, NSW, on a blind date in Melbourne. In 1961 they married and settled on "Pardoo", 400 hectares of scrub that they set about clearing on the edge of Victoria's Otway Ranges, near Colac. "We bought the land for \$30 an acre in 1960 and harvested timber for 10 years just to try and clear some acres to grow grass," says Andrew. "We had one agricultural expert who came out and looked at the place, the scrub and rabbits, kicked the dirt and said, 'If I were you I'd let the whole lot go back to bush, it's hopeless'."

Not put off by the glum assessment, Andrew set about experimenting with adding trace elements to improve the soil and breeding Herefords while Mary had their three children, Amanda, Charlie and Tom, and kept the stud's vital cattle records. When Mary's brother, Frank, visited from New Zealand in the late 1960s, he surveyed the scene, saw Andrew using a slide rule to nut out weight-gain ratios in his Herefords and declared it just the place for running stud Angus cattle. "He said let's start a partnership and that's how we got started," Mary says. In 1971 they imported two Te Mania bulls and 58 stud females. This was significant. Frank had installed NZ's first on-farm cattle scales and Te Mania bulls had been performance-tested (recorded and chosen for breeding based on the ability of their offspring to gain weight) from the 1950s, so the bulls whose calves gained weight the quickest were kept and those whose



Te Mania overseer Paul Schuuring moves cattle across the station.



ABOVE: Successful Angus breeders: (l-r) Hamish and Amanda McFarlane and Tom, Mary and Andrew Gubbins. OPPOSITE: Station hand Keith Murrell moves a small mob of cattle by motorbike.

calves lagged or did poorly were culled. Frank was selecting for economic meat production. It worked and breeders in Scotland, the US and Australia began to buy Te Mania bulls.

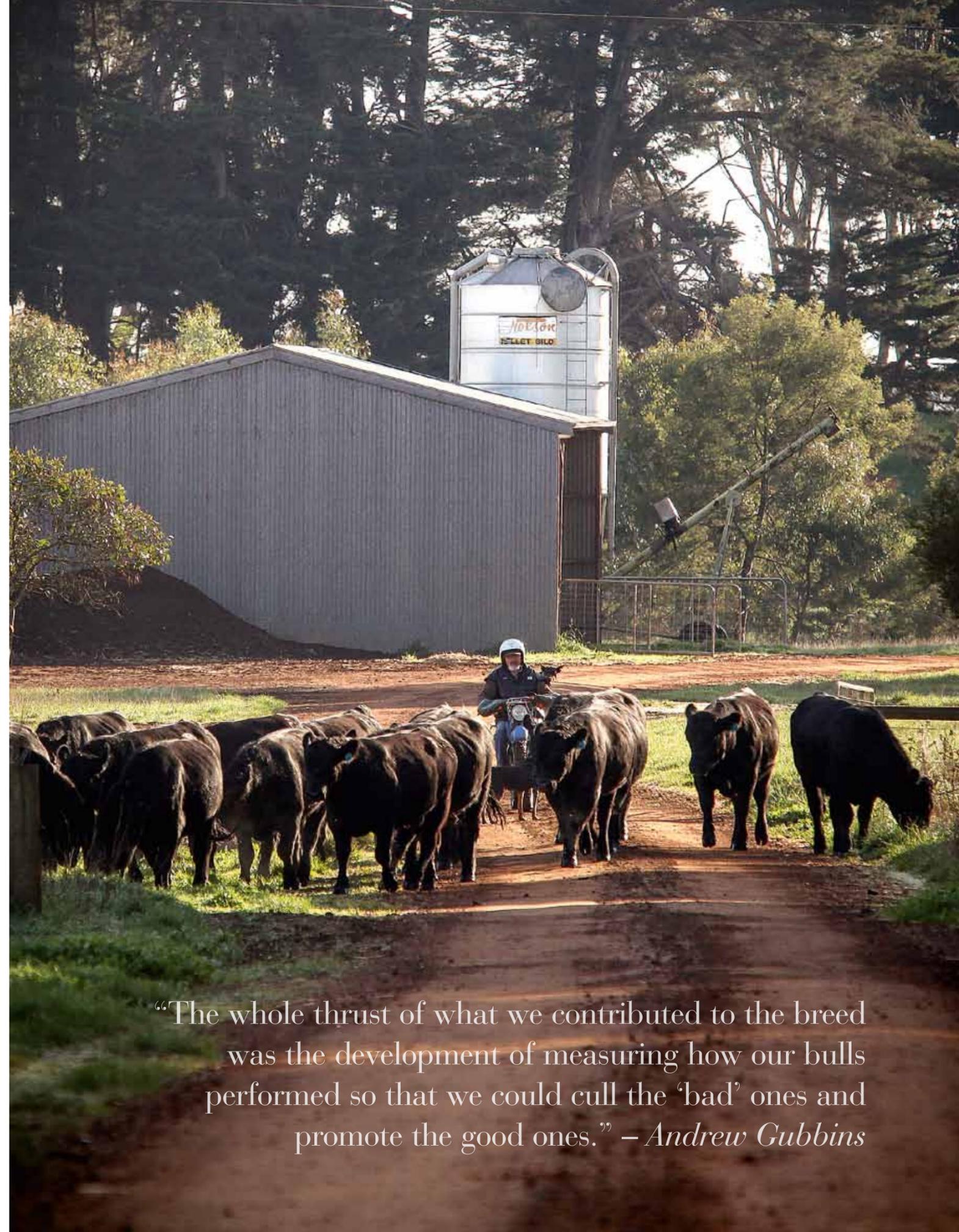
In 1978 Mary and Andrew hit headlines with their best bull, 'Uranium'. The name was a headline-maker amid the then rising anger over government plans to approve new uranium mines in northern Australia. Uranium had a pile of records behind him as a result of Andrew's pioneering idea to test their bulls against others from other studs – two from central Victoria and one from South Australia – on their farm. The production records spoke for themselves. Uranium was declared Grand Champion Angus bull at the Suzuki National Angus Show and Sale that year and fetched a record \$21,000.

"The whole thrust of what we contributed to the breed was the development, along with other people of course, of measuring how our bulls performed so that we could cull the 'bad' ones and promote the good ones," Andrew, now 77, recalls. "That was my great challenge. I started out with a slide rule. We didn't have computers then. We had scales and were weighing the animals at birth and ascertaining at what weight they'd get stuck in their mothers. Then we began to measure how much weight the stock gained a day."

The Gubbins family kept taking steps forward. The next one was to test the bulls for the ability of their daughters to calve early. This meant greater ease of calving and less risk of losing a calf at birth. Andrew believed such a trait was heritable and could be bred for. But it was early days for this stuff and tensions were

high. Show lovers, people used to gaining ribbons for the look of their animals, didn't necessarily take to such 'hocus-pocus'. The Gubbinses pushed on. Andrew had joined the Angus Council and urged fellow Angus breeders to adopt these measures. He figured if he could hasten the gap between generations, progress would be quicker. So in 1980 he began transferring embryos fathered by the best bulls into lots of cows each year. "The aim was to try and get 30 offspring from one cow which we'd selected as being an outstanding cow. I thought it was very attainable and quite fascinating to think if we had a good cow and a good bull and we could get 30 calves we'd get an enormous lift."

Today Te Mania bulls are famed for many features. Their catalogue is like a lolly shop for cattle farmers. Most popular are the bulls whose offspring will calve easily, produce low-weight calves that gain weight quickly without excessive feeding and have top-quality carcass characteristics: for commercial farmers these are the money makers. Although already at the top of the industry game (having held all sales records in Australia for stud Angus cattle), Te Mania's push for progress continues at the Mortlake station, headquarters of the family company that runs the stud. Currently there are 2500 head of stock here, including 1200 stud females and 500 stud bulls. Next year the station will produce 700 stud bulls. It's here the family meets, farms and occasionally picnics together on the stony ridge overlooking the Hopkins River that runs through the property with station staff – head stockman Paul Schuuring and station hands Keith Murrell, Tony 'Nails' McLennan and Shannon Taylor. ▶



"The whole thrust of what we contributed to the breed was the development of measuring how our bulls performed so that we could cull the 'bad' ones and promote the good ones." – Andrew Gubbins



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Prize bull D19 boasts good looks and top performance attributes; Keith Murrell and Paul Schuurung bring cattle in for weighing; the former woolshed is now known as the 'bull shed', where bull sales are held; station hand Shannon Taylor, agronomist Robby Zeissig and Paul Schuurung inspect pasture growth; stencils from wool-growing days hang in the Te Mania shed.

But free time is rare. Since first leasing part of the former Woollongoon in 2000, Te Mania Angus has slowly extended its ownership and has transformed the former sheep country. Large paddocks have given way to smaller cell-grazed areas, big steel gates have replaced more benign versions and the decaying old bluestone shearers' cottages have for the most part gone and have been replaced by a contemporary set of well-designed yards with bugle runs and computerised scales. An original 1840s bluestone cookhouse, with its beautiful wood-fired bread oven, is now the morning and arvo tea spot for the station hands and doubles as an office outpost and coat repository. Across from there, the shearers' 'mess' is now a sitting room with couches and chairs, its open fire offering warm respite for visitors on cold winter days. A bench makes a handy resting place for a laptop computer. The shed between is neat as a pin with the station's four motorbikes lined up in corporate-like order and bolts and bits organised into clearly named plastic half buckets.

Woollongoon's old woolshed is now a smart auction room with a catering-standard kitchen and a projector and a screen, where video footage of the livestock is shown during auctions. Hessian-covered side walls hold some of the old wool stencils. Such is the shed's amenity that local groups gather here for all sorts of events, such as a Melbourne Cup Day lunch to raise funds for a local home for the aged. Outside, yards designed to maximise public viewing of the animals are well-watered and planted with shrubs along some fences to cut the wind factor and beautify the area.

One wing of the old woolshed hosts an old 50KVA, diesel-powered RAAF generator that Tom picked up for a song in Colac. It keeps pumps going and is the key to ensuring water troughs, fed by 22km of polypipe across the station, remain filled, even when grid power is down. It's essential the cattle are well watered. Each drinks up to 80 litres a day. The supply is the Hopkins River that runs through Te Mania and has been fenced off so cattle don't muddy its waters and to create a corridor for native species.

Tom, 45, has led the transformation at Mortlake but everyone has pitched in. Indeed the key to the entire project is that the family, Andrew and Mary, Tom and his wife, Lucy, and Tom's sister, Amanda, and her husband Hamish McFarlane, provide a committed and dedicated workforce with a range of skills. Amanda, 50, a business studies graduate who once worked as a personal assistant for former Liberal politician Andrew Peacock and for the renowned Melbourne caterer Peter Rowland, is responsible for marketing and advertising. Lucy, 41, helps design the sale catalogues and will drive the company's social media activities while Hamish, a former finance broker, looks after finance, administration and the clients. Tom drives technological developments and excels at problem solving. The middle Gubbins sibling, Charlie, opted out of the family company while it was still based at Pardoo to develop his own business interests.

The family sold Pardoo in late 2008 and shifted west. "We were in a dairying area there and because there is more money ▶





ABOVE: Hamish McFarlane, Ross Milne from Elders Hamilton, and Clark Roycroft from Elders Camperdown inspect cattle for an upcoming sale. OPPOSITE: Tom Gubbins' dog 'Max' outside the old overseer's cottage (left) and the bluestone Te Mania office.



to be made from dairying from that land we felt like we were better off in a location where the capital cost of land was cheaper and we could do the exact same thing," Tom says. "Breeding stud cattle at Pardoo was like running a manufacturing business in Collins Street; we couldn't expand there. We did a PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) chart that said we needed to expand the business to support our three families but also, in the cattle-breeding enterprise we're in, we could see we'd be facing high technology costs. We needed to spread those costs over a larger number of animals and by having a bigger business we could justify a bigger research and development budget." It was an economy-of-scale decision. Pardoo, with 250 bulls maximum, was bursting at the seams by the mid-1990s.

PERT and management acronyms are common lingo among the Gubbinses who tackled family farm succession issues in the 1990s well before the term became commonly used in the national agricultural lexicon. Consequently each of the adults – Mary, Andrew, Lucy, Tom, Amanda and Hamish – are directors of the family company which is chaired by an independent chairman, currently Rod Ashby, a Geelong farm business advisor. As Mary says, "Andrew didn't want to be the umpire in any family stoush".

The story behind the company's formation and how it embraces and accommodates the three families is salutary. It began in the Pardoo period when Amanda and Hamish, who have three children, Caroline, George and Olivia, were in Melbourne but ached to return to the land. Tom was equally connected with rural life, but Mary and Andrew had encouraged their children to leave the farm and experience the world. Tom, a

dyslexic like his father, had found a niche working for Lloyds of London, setting up data-gathering systems and teaching British farmers how to use computers.

Getting things sorted began with Mary and Andrew's friend and mentor, the late surf swimmer Maurie Raynor. "He told us about PERT charts and all sorts of things we'd never heard of," Mary says. "It was amazing."

"He enabled us to see clearly and to work out a vision," Amanda says. "He didn't write the shareholdings. Mum and Dad brought in our local Colac accountant Paul Mahoney to do that. Paul saw our vision and what we wanted to work towards and he made a very clear succession plan with an exit clause for any family who wanted to leave the business."

It was a profound step for the family and not without its challenges as each came to learn, appreciate and acknowledge the skills of others. One family meeting that Maurie was chairing early on hit an impasse. There was conflict. Arms were crossed and the mood was negative. Amanda says Maurie stopped the meeting. "He said, 'I can see we're not going to get anywhere today like this'. So he made us sit facing each other with our knees touching and asked each of us to say what we didn't like about the person sitting opposite and then to move around and tell each other what we loved about each other."

Mary remembers recoiling in horror at the time. "It was quite hard work sitting across from your brand-new daughter-in-law and telling her things you didn't like about her," the 74-year-old matriarch says. "In the end I said I hate going for a walk early in the morning, knowing you're still in bed." Her honest reflection, not unusual for a hard-working woman of the land

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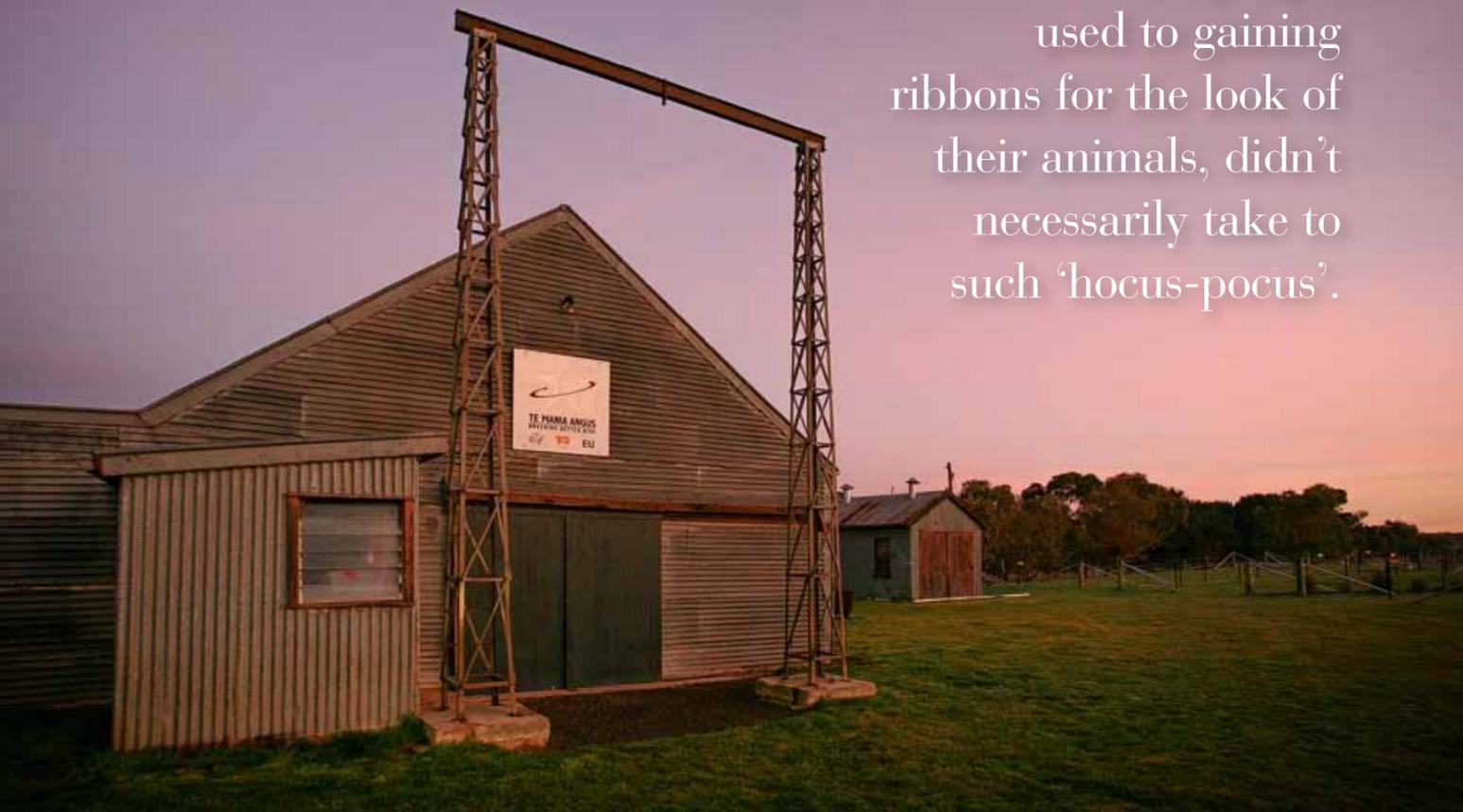
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ABOVE: The former woolshed has found new purpose as the sale room for Te Mania bulls.

Show lovers, people used to gaining ribbons for the look of their animals, didn't necessarily take to such 'hocus-pocus'.

hoping for a similar work ethic in the newest member of her expanding family, prompted an equally honest response. "Well I hate knowing that you're walking past my house knowing I'm still in bed," Lucy said. "It was quite confronting and very powerful," Lucy now says. "We laughed about it in the end. A lot of people got a lot of very important stuff off their chests."

"It's a vibrant, multi-generational family business," Hamish says. "Mary and Andrew have a lot of wisdom. We're just expanding their foundation. In terms of trading, I think things are not getting any better for primary producers so scale becomes important, scale being pooling of assets, and that's what we've done. We've pooled all our assets. If we'd tried to do this – each family on its own – it wouldn't have succeeded to the point it has. We wouldn't have the scale or the assets to buy more land. I think the secret is we've grown big enough that everyone is fully occupied."

Occupied is right. Amanda and Hamish run the office and bull depot at Connewarre, two hours east of Mortlake near Geelong, where leased sires are health-tested and assessed for future breeding and/or sale. The family runs a sale at Walgett in northern NSW each year for which it trucks up more than 100 bulls as well as its annual on-property bull sale. (Last year the top-priced bull was \$91,000; this year it was \$25,000.) There's embryo transfers, the industry-leading inter-herd progeny testing program called Team Te Mania, countless research programs, conservation efforts, soil improvement and on and on the list goes. Among the company's retained consultants are geneticists, economists and soil analysts.

The Team Te Mania project hints at the company's direction. Under this project, about 35 Angus herds around the nation, mostly in south-east Australia, get Te Mania superior genetics at a subsidised rate in return for information about progeny, such as growth rates and other measurable traits. "The benefit for them is that they get good stock at subsidised prices and a back-up service," Hamish says. "In return we get information that contributes to the performance record of that animal."

It's a program that Tom, who was Australia's Livestock Producer of the Year in 2011, hopes will speed up genetic gains which he believes the beef industry so desperately needs to stay competitive against other meat and protein sources. The Team Te Mania members breed with Te Mania genetics – using semen or the bulls themselves – mating each bull across a number of females. This is called progeny testing. By spreading the progeny testing more broadly there is a greater chance of identifying the best performers. The traits are recorded with BREEDPLAN, an international genetic evaluation system. The Animal Genetics and Breeding unit at the University of New England in Armidale, NSW, says the rationale for BREEDPLAN is simple: "The larger the population of cattle being evaluated the higher the chance of finding elite genetic material which can then be rapidly disseminated using modern artificial breeding techniques."

The traits recorded and measured in each animal are extraordinary in range and detail. They include calving ease, both from the bull's influence and the female's influence, gestation length, birth weight, 200-day, 400-day and 600-day growth, cow



mature size (the aim is to choose for stock that maintain growth while minimising size at maturity so they don't get too big and thus cost more to feed), milk (an estimation of how much milk cows can place into their calves), scrotal size, days to calving (the interval between when a cow calves and re-conceives), carcass weight at 650 days, retail beef yield, intramuscular fat, docility and even an animal's front foot and rear leg claw set, the front and rear foot angle and the rear leg side and hind view are assessed. They're calculated for each bull to create what's called an Estimated Breeding Value (EBV) for that trait and it's the EBVs that buyers are most interested in.

But the uptake across the industry has been slow. "The big challenge for the beef industry is genetic gain," Tom says. "We have all the tools sitting in the cabinet at Meat and Livestock Australia. Cattle farmers paid \$100 million to have tools developed and yet few are buying them, because people still prefer to look at the animal and judge them on their size rather than on their economic statistics. Those new to the industry take up the technology but for the showmen who have great pride in their 'judging', the fact that someone can use a computer to select the best animal is really quite confronting. The way it used to work was an international judge would come to the royal show, line up the animals and talk about them using terms like 'spring of rib', 'cutability', their 'great presence' and how they are 'filling their pants'. Then people would go away and try to breed their cattle like that so you end up with this whole culture breeding cattle based on how they look. I don't agree with that."

Scattered around the Mortlake property in offices and sheds are laptops and computers on which every skerrick of information about any animal on the farm can be accessed. There's a computer embedded in the side wall of the cattle yards near the scales so that every time an animal crosses the scales a sensor reads the tag in its ear and the computer records the animal's weight. The information is stored using cloud software so it can be accessed across the farm, at the bull depot and in the main office.

With so much invested and many lifetimes of work tied up in Te Mania, the Gubbins and McFarlane families are optimistic that yet another generation might rise to take over the reins. Tom and Lucy's three children, Edward, 15, Georgie, 13, and Sarah, 7, still have a way to go but their grandfather is convinced the business will be viable for generations. "In my view the world is going to use more beef," Andrew says. "There are more people and less land to produce it on so it's got to be successful if the product is good." By then, dear old Daiquiri, the 21st-century Angus dazzler, will be test tube material only.

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