

Bonsmara making an impression

By **PENELOPE ARTHUR**

JOHN BYRNE and his family are the major shareholders in Australia's largest Bonsmara operation, Yarra Bonsmara. Mr Byrne is first and foremost a businessman and he believes it was his ability to recognise a promising business venture that initially attracted him to the Bonsmara breed. Mr Byrne sat down with *Queensland Country Life's Penelope Arthur* to talk about the development of the Bonsmara breed in Australia and how he believes it can revolutionise the northern beef industry.

John Byrne first became interested in cattle genetics when he owned a beef property on the Mornington Peninsula where he was experimenting with Brahman and Limousin cross cattle.

Mr Byrne recognised that Brahmans were well suited to conditions in Australia but wanted to improve on some breed traits, such as meat quality, by using other genetics.

"We eventually sold that property and about 15 years after the sale of the Victorian property I was shown some Bonsmara cattle and asked to invest in bringing the breed to Australia," Mr Byrne said.

"I took one look at the Bonsmara and knew it was just what I had been trying to achieve with my Brahman and Limousin cross cattle."

Mr Byrne is an entrepreneur who has built and operated a number of mining ventures around the world.

Apart from his cattle interests he is a major shareholder and chairman of Wasabi Energy - an Australian based energy and water company which is also operating in South Africa.

"When you work in South Africa you come to respect their great farming and mining knowledge. The history of the Bonsmara breed reflects just this."

He said knowing the Bonsmara breed was specially developed by scientists and farmers in South Africa gave him great confidence in the foundations of the breed.

This confidence was also supported by the 'South Africans' strict adherence to 'The Bonsmara System' in their country, which has led to the breed becoming the benchmark in breeding.

"When I learned that the South Africans had bred this animal specifically for Africa, and I determined the huge amount of research that had gone into the development of the breed, I was blown away," he said.

"The Bonsmara are probably the most genetically advanced cattle ever produced and I could see huge potential in trying to bring the breed to Australia where conditions are so similar to South Africa."

"We knew the only way to prove to cattlemen in northern Australia that this was a breed that could complement and improve their Brahman herds was to put them on the ground here in Queensland, so we set about establishing our own base herd."

The Rise of Yarra Bonsmara

With the help of Yarra Bonsmara manager, Tony Berry, the Byrne family began importing Bonsmara embryos from South Africa after purchasing their Beaudesert property, "Wirlinga" in 2005.

Mr Berry said he was greatly guided by South African based veterinarian, Dr Ronnie dela Ray, in his selection of Bonsmara genetics for the foundation of the Yarra herd.

"Dr dela Ray runs Embryo Plus in South Africa and pioneered the embryo procedure in that country," he said.



Yarra Bonsmara manager Tony Berry looks over a mob of purebred Bonsmara heifers at their "Wirlinga" property, Beaudesert.

I took one look at the Bonsmara and knew it was just what I had been trying to achieve...

"He is highly regarded by cattlemen all over the world and has an exceptional understanding of the Bonsmara breed."

"He really guided me as to which were the best bloodlines to be using and opened the doors to some of the biggest players in the Bonsmara breed in South Africa."

"We have formed strategic alliances with the top South African studs to ensure a continual supply of embryos, as we plan to continue implanting 200 each year."

"The issue we're facing with that is an import restriction due to a Foot and Mouth disease outbreak

in South Africa, but we have plenty of embryos in the tank to keep us going for a while."

Yarra Bonsmara have continued their embryo transfer program alongside natural matings and welcomed their first natural calves in 2007.

In 2008 the company purchased a second property, "Yarra", at Gogango in central Queensland.

The property is used as a bull depot and to run a commercial crossbred Bonsmara herd which includes Grey Brahman, Red Brahman, Droughtmaster, Brangus and Santa Gertrudis females to trial the respective crosses.

Owner, John Byrne said establishing the stud and commercial herds had been "long and expensive but well worthwhile".

"It has been a long term process because you generally only get a 50 percent success rate with the embryos and then we have been culling at least 30 percent of those to ensure we maintain the utmost quality in the base herd," Mr Byrne said.

"But we are starting to see some natural growth now and are currently running 200 purebred

Yarra Bonsmara - A Timeline

- 2005** Yarra Bonsmara purchase "Wirlinga" at Beaudesert
- 2005** Yarra Bonsmara began an extensive embryo transfer program by importing embryos from South Africa
- 2007** First calves born by natural mating
- 2008** Yarra Bonsmara purchase "Yarra" at Gogango in central Queensland. Purchase of multiple *Bos indicus* breeds to determine the success of Bonsmara cross in the central Qld environment
- 2008** First Bonsmara bull sales begin out of the paddock
- 2011** Sale of 110 Yarra Bonsmara bulls to the Australian Agricultural Company (AACo)

breeders with the aim of eventually running 500 purebred cows."

"As we grow, we will need to move more of our breeders to Yarra and in the next couple of years we aim to buy another property to continue expanding our commercial herd."

It is evident that Mr Byrne and his team have big plans for the breed in Australia, as well as interest in exporting their genetics on a world stage to destinations such as South America.

"Our vision is to be Australia's leading supplier of premium Bonsmara genetics to the northern beef industry, and the world."

Mr Berry hit the road in 2008 to promote Yarra Bonsmara and the Bonsmara breed. That year their first "significant" Bonsmara bull sales were also recorded.

"That's when we started our marketing in earnest and I started taking cattle to field days all over Queensland," he said.

"We wanted to improve the understanding of the breed and explain what it could contribute to herds in northern Australia."

Making an impression in the North

Just four years later, Yarra Bonsmara has achieved the type of sale most studs can only dream of with 110 Bonsmara bulls selling to the AAcO later last year.

Stud owner, John Byrne, is confident more northern cattlemen will come to recognise the important attributes of the Bonsmara breed.

"I have great respect for cattlemen in northern Australia and the conditions they operate under but I think the Bonsmara breed can be used to improve *Bos indicus* herds in that country," he said.

"I know that the Bonsmara can deliver on all fronts including carcass weight, ability to calve and ability to conceive - against the purebred Brahmans our numbers are very impressive."

"If you are a Brahman breeder and you want to improve your returns by 15-20 percent, then you will need to use Bonsmara genetics to do it."

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Mustering Yarra Bonsmara's young Bonsmara cross cattle at "Yarra", Gogango.

