

# Honoring Our Producers

## California ranching operations recognized by the CBCIA

Recipients of the California Beef Cattle Improvement Association's Producers of the Year Awards were recognized at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Annual CCA/CCW Convention last month in Sparks, Nev. The following article takes a look at each of the winners – Commercial Producer of the Year, Hearst Ranch, San Simeon and Cholame, and Seedstock Producer of the Year, Oak Ridge Angus, Calistoga.

### 2008 CBCIA Commercial Producer of the Year – Hearst Ranch, San Simeon and Cholame

The Hearst Ranch Beef Division of the Hearst Corporation raises cattle on the 80,000-acre San Simeon Ranch which surrounds the Hearst Castle, and the 73,000-acre Jack Ranch in Cholame, 60 miles east of San Simeon.

The Hearst Ranches are owned by the Hearst Corporation and operated by **Steve Hearst**, president of the corporation's Sunical Land and Livestock Division, which is headquartered in San Francisco.

Hearst's ranch management team is comprised of ranch manager **Cliff Garrison**; beef production manager, **Roland Camacho**; and division manager **Brian Kenny**.

The San Simeon Ranch was originally purchased in 1865, while the Jack Ranch was purchased in 1964. Both ranches are working cattle ranches.

The San Simeon Ranch operates under a conservation easement with California Rangeland Trust, American Land Conservancy and the State of California. The ranch maintains a 1,000-head base cowherd, while the Jack Ranch maintains a base cowherd of 2,500-head.

Cattle are predominantly Angus with some Hereford and Shorthorn influence. Hearst uses both natural

and artificial insemination (AI) breeding programs for its fall-calving program.

Both ranches are integrated under a unified management strategy. The team optimizes resource utilization by cross-training personnel on both ranches.

At Hearst, the management team strives to produce quality calves to sustain the herd as replacement heifers and/or bulls. They produce quality calves that will finish on grass and ultimately reach the consumer, who will have a great eating experience.

The program utilizes low-birth weight bulls and they are currently DNA-testing bulls to evaluate them for carcass merit. The operation uses the scores from the DNA test as an augment to the EPDs on file for each bull.

The bull battery is evaluated for phenotypic traits as well. The company is recognized and certified as humane (Humane Farm Animal Care) and sustainable (Food Alliance) beef cattle producers. Low-stress handling is a major component of the certification processes, therefore, culling for disposition has helped the operation calm down the herd.

Aside from standard structural breeding soundness, management prefers a moderate-framed, deep-bodied type of animal with slightly finer bone.

Garrison describes the operation's marketing as diverse, with both robust niche and commodity components. On the commodity side, some of the operation's calves are sold through the video market, while cull calves and cattle are sold through the local livestock auction market.

On the niche side, the operation sells frozen portioned boxed steaks through its retail Web site, [www.hearstranch.com](http://www.hearstranch.com), through its retail kiosk at the Hearst Castle Visitor Center and through specialty retailer Williams-Sonoma®.

The operation sells all-natural, grass-fed and grass-finished on the rail, and as boxed beef through its wholesale fresh program, while also selling frozen beef patties and hot dogs through its wholesale frozen program.

The ranch uses the software program, CattleMax®, to assist in maintaining and managing operations at both ranches. They also use the program to track cattle sales.

All of the cattle are individually identified with at least two forms and every animal has a radio-frequency-identification (RFID) tag. Each time cattle are handled for any reason, the data is entered into the computer program.

The ranch utilizes a custom database that tracks cattle and beef from the ranch through the harvesting process into the box and finally to the consumer. The operation uses the data to produce customer invoices, to predict Red Meat Yield (RMY) and for traceability purposes.

All revenue and expenses are coded and charted to specific accounts maintained in the Hearst office. Copies of all receipts and invoices are kept on file at both ranch headquarters and in the corporate office.

Through the ranch's Web site, the kiosk at the Hearst Castle and through traditional marketing methods, the team at Hearst strives to educate the



CBCIA President John Toledo presents the 2008 Commercial Producer of the Year Award to Hearst Ranch representatives (L to R): Brian Kenny, Roland Camacho, Cliff Garrison and Steve Hearst.

public on the benefits of sustainable beef production.

Red Meat Yield (RMY), Hot Carcass Weight (HCW) and tenderness are just a few of the many pieces of information that are stored in the company's database.

By comparing against the live weight, Hearst can harvest its finished cattle at the optimum time. Through sire selection (DNA testing and EPDs), wet aging and needling its product, the operation can achieve its desired level of tenderness.

Being vertically integrated, the operation enjoys a certain amount of flexibility. Conception rate helps the management team to project the next two years of operations (replacements, finished beef, etc.), while the percentage calf crop weaned is an indicator of the operation's stewardship.

Hearst charts all of its expenses. Supplements (hay, feed, salt, etc.) and drugs (vet service, vaccine, dewormer, etc.) are the two categories that are constantly evaluated. Part of the program's sustainable approach to agriculture and ranching involves continual improvement.

As an example, the ranch conducts its own fecal testing and only administers dewormer as needed.

They also evaluate available pasture at different times of the year and have custom mineral/protein crumble available for cattle, providing exactly what is lacking.

Hearst preconditions its calves and its vaccination protocol is evaluated annually with a local vet to ensure only what is necessary is administered.

The operation utilizes Management Intensive Grazing (MIT). The management strategy spans over a two-year production interval. This is because the operation is vertically integrated and they are finishing cattle on grass. Hearst's grazing strategy is designed to accommodate factors, such as to finish the operation's free range, grass-fed cattle on a schedule.

To have the cowherd accessible at the appropriate time for each stage of production (calving, branding, preg check, etc.). And, because the operation is a part of one of largest land conservation easements in California, its resource utilization and sustainability is monitored regularly, so grazing strategies are essential.

At Hearst, the use of harvested feeds is very limited. They utilize a moderate grazing intensity, which leaves a significant amount of residual dry matter. Hearst does use some hay (alfalfa) as a protein supplement to give for its first-calf heifers and for its bull battery as a kick-start before turnout. The combination of selection, culling, grazing management and resource management helps the team to minimize supplemental feeding.

Hearst would like to continue to improve its cowherd through selection, culling and breeding programs in order to establish an ideal combination of hardy and efficient cattle for the range and consumption.

A long-term goal of the organization is both to establish a year-round forage-chain grazing system by developing its permanent pastures, and to ensure drought protection by farming and harvesting ample supplies of baled forage crops.



CBCIA President John Toledo presents the 2008 Seedstock Producer of the Year Award to (L to R): Cheryl La Franchi, Frank Mongini, DVM, and Rachel La Franchi of Oak Ridge Angus, Calistoga.

### 2008 CBCIA Seedstock Producer of the Year – Oak Ridge Angus, Calistoga

The La Franchi family cattle ranch, founded in 1912, is nestled in a small area called Knights Valley, in the northern most corner of California's Napa Valley.

The original ranch consisted of 420 acres and, as with most turn-of-the-century ranching families, it was the sole source of support for the founding family members.

In the early years, the ranching operation consisted of dairy cows, beef cattle, chicken and egg production. Draft horses were also owned and used for farming.

The operation expanded in 1968 with the purchase of a 770-acre neighboring ranch – and today, the operation is solely a beef cattle ranch.

The Oak Ridge Angus operation currently consists of 1,186 deeded acres and 2,900 acres of leased land.

The Oak Ridge cowherd consists of 400 mother cows – 300 of which are registered (280 Black Angus and 20 Red Angus), as well as 100 commercial cows.

Each year, Oak Ridge registers approximately 100 bulls and 60

heifers, selling roughly 100 bulls, 100 bred heifers, 80 steers and a small group of heifer calves.

A family-owned and operated operation, the ranch is managed by **Cheryl La Franchi** with help from her husband **Frank Mongini, DVM**, brother and sister-in-law Eric and Stephanie La Franchi, and nieces Rachel and Ashley La Franchi and nephew Logan La Franchi.

As California enters its second serious drought year, the operation's short term goals have undergone a drastic reconfiguration and the main focus now is to keep current on the liabilities against the ranching operation in the event of another dry year.

In her tenure as ranch manager, Cheryl La Franchi has found it wise to never count on taxes, rental agreements, equipment repair, fuel or cattle maintenance costs to decline and, she has realistically come to budget for an unforeseen expense or two – like a tractor or truck. The main facet of the ranching operation,

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where expenditures have been most successfully cut, has been in the area of animal feed. The most effective cost-cutting tool the operation has utilized has been to mix rice straw with the alfalfa hay and brewer's malt that is normally used as feed.

The ranch has a unique resource for feed, thanks to the Micro Brew uprising in the late 1990s. During that time, three small breweries opened for business near the ranch and the La Franchi's have received the spent grain from the beer-making process. They pick up the wet, warm grain in small dump trailers, haul it to the ranch and feed it to some of the cows.

According to La Franchi, the spent grain is a waste product for the breweries and the herd benefits from the added protein source.

As with most rural families, the cattle ranch is not just a business, but a way of life. The ranch is a picturesque place to live, where natural springs supply water to the houses.

Over the years, a hillside dam was developed on each ranch. These dams not only provide water for the cattle and a comfortable habitat for the waterfowl and wildlife on the ranch, they have enabled the family to plant many native Valley Oak trees, many fast growing Sycamore shade trees for the cows and calves born in summer and early fall.

The ranch will hold its 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Bull Sale on the ranch on Sept. 13, 2009. Some of the top bulls in California are produced by the La Franchi family and in high demand by repeat customers. The operation has utilized AI as a reproductive tool since the early 1960s. La Franchi feels that AI is one of the best tools towards genetic improvement.

About 70 percent of its purebred herd is AI-sired, with the remainder of the purebred and all the commercial herd sired naturally.

When selecting the AI sires, La Franchi pays particular attention to a sires' frame size, EPDs, carcass data and scrotal circumference. She also likes to "check out" what his maternal lineage looks like, particularly in regards to udder and femininity, his daughters' outlook and his maternal milk numbers breeding values.

Her main criteria when purchasing

a natural service herdsire is birth weight. She says it is very important to her bull customers, that the bulls throw low-birth weight calves, especially considering that the majority of her fall bulls are purchased to be used on yearling heifers.

Since the operation can get a tremendous amount of rainfall, La Franchi has modified her AI breeding program to accommodate the natural weather pattern and bull sale requirements, rather than the natural feed conditions.

According to La Franchi, the system has led to less calf mortality and heat detection is much simpler and more accurate. Since the cows are in the hay fields at this time, she says breeding them is much less labor intensive too.

La Franchi usually turns out her herdsires during the first two weeks of December, depending on the weather. The commercial herd follows the same program as the registered cowherd, except that they are all bred

naturally. La Franchi has found, even though the breeding season on her commercial cows was moved forward, by utilizing natural service sires, she has experienced neither an increase in feed costs nor a decline in their reproductive fertility.

La Franchi adds about 40 first-calf heifers to the cowherd each year, making careful selections as to which heifers will make the cut and develop into the best cows.

As a result of a successful annual bull sale and excellent set of calves on the ground, Oak Ridge Angus looks ahead to another successful year in the seedstock business.

La Franchi has a long-term goal of leaving the ranch as she received it from her late father Henry La Franchi and late uncle Albert La Franchi. She has put her heart and sole into working toward her goal of passing along a financially viable and reputable cattle ranch to the fourth generation of the La Franchi family.