



TREASURE ISLAND

Valuable Wagyu cattle are mustered on to an island off the northwest Tasmanian coast.

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Brothers turn the tide



The Hammond brothers run a very unusual operation, writes SARAH HUDSON

IT is a rare, remarkable Australian agricultural snapshot: cattle mustered across the low tide waters off Tasmania's northwest coast to graze on sand dune vegetation over winter.

And it's all the more unusual because those cattle are the highly prized Japanese Wagyu breed.

Since the Hammond brothers — Keith and John — moved to the fourth-generation family farm on Robbins Island in 1981 they have been upholding the mustering cattle tradition.

“This property has 13km of pristine white beaches like the Whitsundays,” said Keith, who lives on the island with his wife, Lisa.

“The love I have for the land is stronger now — its beauty and diver-

sity — than when I first came here.

“I can drive around the island on our four-wheel drive bike, up to 100km in a day, and I never tire of its beauty.”

Keith and John — together with third brother Chauncey in Sydney — run Robbins Island Wagyu, not only one of the leaders in their field for genetics, but also supplying high marbled beef to domestic and international markets.

The beef is farmed on three proper-



ties, Robbins Island (10,125ha), Walker Island (700 ha) and on the mainland at Montagu (240ha), where John lives with his wife, Rochelle. The family has owned Robbins and Walker islands since the early 1900s.

With mustering of cattle between the islands and the mainland, the Hammonds have a total of 2000 breeding cows, classified as either full blood (100 per cent of genetics from Japan) or pure bred (93.75 per cent or above).

Half of the herd, the steers, about 1000 a year, are bred to 18 months of

age or 400kg before being sent to the Australian Agricultural Company for a

long feed of up to 500 days, then slaughtered at 420-440kg dressed weight and sold domestically and internationally. These steers have a marble score average of about eight with plenty reaching the top mark of nine, according to Keith.

The heifers, are grass fed on their Tasmanian properties for three years before being sent to Greenham abattoir in nearby Smithton, at 300kg dressed weight. The beef is then marketed under the Robbins Island Wagyu brand through Asia and Australia. About 30 heifers are slaughtered every two weeks.

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Tassie brothers turn the tide with Wagyu

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While Robbins Island Wagyu uses some of the best genetics available — including breeding polled cattle and elite soft fat genes — the Hammond's road to success has not always been smooth. As early pioneers of Australian Wagyu, their learning has been through trial and error.

Keith was born in Tasmania — where his mother Mary's family had been pioneers in the

state's shipping and aviation. But he lived on a 1620ha wheat farm in Oklahoma, in the US, from the age of five to 21, when his American father Gene moved the family back to his home country.

After studying law in the US, Keith, 54, said he had no plans to become a farmer, but it was Robbins Island — which his parents had purchased from his mother's family in 1958 and had subsequently been leased as a

beef farm — that drew him back.

"Our father had burnt us all out on the wheat farm. We were available labour. He pushed us pretty hard. We didn't have a passion for it," he said.

"It was a completely different scenario to farming beef in Tasmania. In Oklahoma it was a cropping farm with old tractors and equipment, flat, plain country.

"It didn't have the beauty,



oceans, beaches and variety of Tasmania.”

Keith moved to Robbins Island in 1980, joined by John the year after and together they set about learning the art of farming Angus and Hereford cattle.

When their father died in 1991 Keith and John decided to move into a niche beef market, not certain that the long-term returns in Angus were strong enough.

“We felt Asia was where our main market would be in the future and we decided Black Wagyu would be the best breed to get into.”

Their timing was perfect.

With the Japanese notoriously protective of Wagyu, their national treasure, in 1992 a

rare trade protocol between the US and Japan saw genetics released, adding to an existing pure bred herd in the US established in the 1970s.

The brothers took advantage of the protocol to import 200 frozen embryos from Canada and the US, which they implanted into surrogate Angus cows.

In subsequent years the Hammonds produced more than 6000 embryos, with a 50-60 per cent conception rate, slightly

above the average.

With flushing for embryos about every three to four months, their best cow produced 150 live calves, before she naturally produced her first calf.

Keith said the more embryo transfers and artificial insemination they did, the better they became.

“It’s luck, having a cow with good fertility, but we also found in getting the best quality embryo (grade one) we needed to feed on old hay, low protein grain pellet — 9 per cent protein — and a bare paddock, making sure they were worm-free and had no trace element deficiencies,” he said.

“We also used very low doses of hormones.

“In an Angus cow you might use a total of 14mL of follicle stimulant hormone, but we would use 5mL, about a third of that of an Angus.

“Wagyu are very sensitive to the drug.

“We also had better conception rates with embryos flushed from cows than heifers.”

Over the years they have added to those initial embryos with bulls and semen from the US, and in 2005 they bought 103 full-blood cows and calves from NSW.

These days the brothers join 60 per cent of the herd in spring, for calving in September, with 40 per cent joined in autumn, for calving in April and May.

This ensures a supply all year round, but also means the spring

herd can take advantage of sand dune vegetation through winter (when pasture grasses are scant), which leads to those remarkable pictures of cattle on the beach.

“They feed on marram grass, native species and seaweed and there’s lots of shelter and warmth while they’re on the beach, too.”

Weaned calves are given supplementary grass silage and hay at the farm at Montagu.

For 15 years Keith and John sold their beef as live trade through a Japanese feedlot, but when the global financial crisis hit in 2007 they “hit a snag”, realising they were tied to just one market.

That’s when they developed their current relationship with the Australian Agricultural Company and Greenhams.

Keith said while their beef was a small slice of Greenhams market, the abattoir nevertheless tender-stretched their meat and “made a big effort to present the product”, which has seen it win food awards around the nation.

In changing their market, the Hammonds turned their attention to the growing demand for grass-fed beef, with no growth hormones (illegal in Tasmania) and no supplements.

Keith said they were still

learning much about farming Wagyu, adding that their goal was to reach two years’ fattening of cattle, rather than three.

“Genomics testing is playing a huge role in moving the industry forward.

“I can see a day when technology gets to the point we’re able to send off DNA from a young calf to see whether it’s suited for long feeding or not.

“It costs a lot to long feed cattle and if they don’t perform it can be an expensive exercise,” he said.

A key focus has been refining the genetics to produce polled cattle.

A growing interest in polled Wagyu means the Hammonds are well placed to supply these genetics. In addition, they have been DNA testing in Japan for the last decade for cattle that produce elite soft fat genes.

“The melting point for Wagyu fat with the soft fat gene is 3C lower than other breeds of cattle and the fat is also higher in monounsaturated fatty acids. Now we just need to get that recognised,” he said.

In the meantime, the next generation of Hammonds will be coming on board, continuing the family tradition.

“Our eldest son, Alex, is just about to graduate from Oklahoma State University with a degree in animal science and business agriculture.

“He loves the property here, riding on the horses, mustering the cattle,” Keith said.

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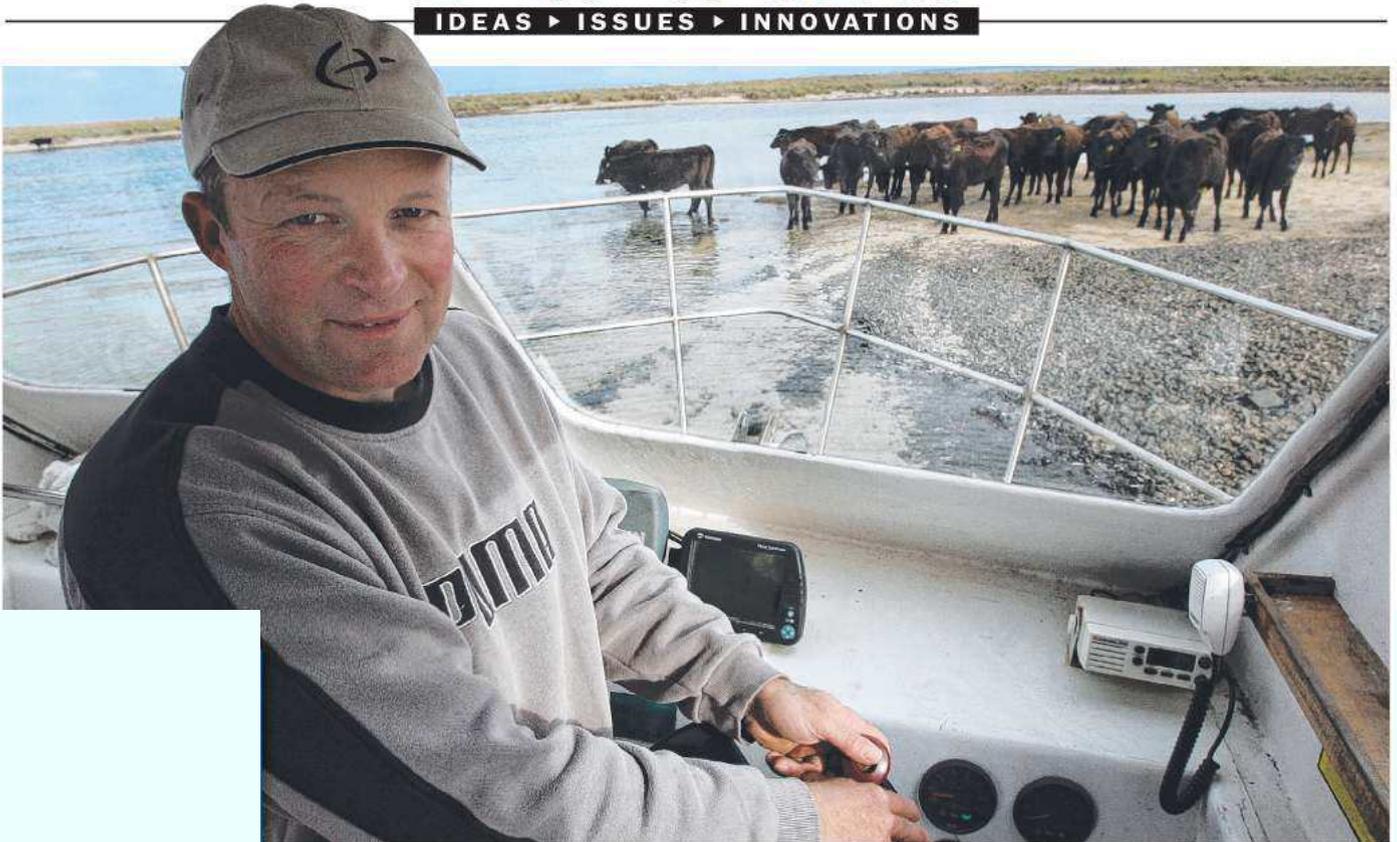


Beef and reef: The Hammond brothers herd their Wagyu cattle between Robbins and Walker islands off Tasmania's northwest coast to graze on the sand dune vegetation and seaweed.

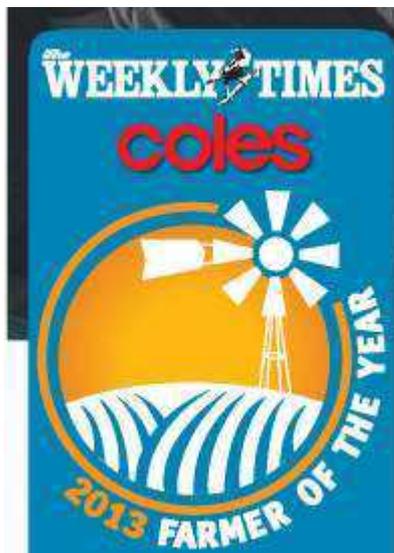


Focus

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Hopes float: Keith Hammond musters Wagyu cattle across the low tide waters at Robbins Island, off the remote northwest coast of Tasmania.



John Hammond is a contender for *The Weekly Times* Coles 2013 Farmer of the Year. Farmers who appear in *The Weekly Times*, weeklytimesnow.com.au and *Farm* are eligible to win one of six categories and, ultimately, be crowned our Farmer of the Year.

Category winners will win \$3000 in prizes, with the 2013 Farmer of the Year receiving \$10,000 cash. To nominate a farmer, and more details, visit

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