



PHOTOS BY FRANKIE C. SUTHER

*The last intact Mexican land-grant ranch in the U.S. adapts cows for quality.*

Story by  
**STEVE SUTHER**

The past lives in its name, which most people today associate with vineyards and wine. A 38,000-acre, 1852 Mexican land-grant ranch in northern Santa Barbara County, Calif., Rancho Sisquoc has always



known cattle. But it was 100 years after its founding, when purchased by the Flood family of San Francisco, that new ideas began to take root.

Beans and barley gave way to gravity-irrigated vegetables and vineyards, starting in 1972 with Johannesburg Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon varieties. The Chumash Indian word for “gathering place,” Sisquoc knew another sense of the phrase in 1977 when the ranch bonded its winery and built a tasting room.

More recently, in 2002, longtime managers Ed Holt and Ron Davis took what may have seemed like steps backward in the hurry-up world of the 21st century.

Holt, general manager, and Davis, cattle manager, decided to raise all-natural beef without added antibiotics, hormonal implants or use of animal byproduct feeds. Moreover, they decided to do it by giving cattle more time to match the natural rhythms of the ranch. “It just fit our ranch and personal goals,”

**Left:** Though Rancho Sisquoc manager Ron Davis sees value in maintaining some level of crossbreeding in the herd, he notes that the Angus breed offers predictability and a helpful array of genetic selection tools.

Holt says. “But we also manage for profit.”

Their 600 Angus-based cows have been selected and managed to produce the best beef, using available resources. One-third of the ranch is in rangeland, rising up 2,500 feet (ft.) above the wild and scenic Sisquoc River.

“We know there are black bears up there, and that’s one reason we calve in the winter, when they are dormant,” Davis says. He works with university Extension as a part of the COIN (California, Oregon, Idaho and Nevada) Livestock Working Group, and keeps up-to-date on other sources for consultation. Davis and Holt have addressed the COIN group on resource integration and predicting cow body condition scores (BCS).

Davis learned holistic management and nutritional efficiency from Stan Parsons’ Ranching for Profit School and from consultant Dick Diven of Agri-Concepts Inc. The training reinforces his 22 years of observations on the ranch.

“We don’t want a herd of ‘riparian huggers’ that overgraze the easy pickings along the rivers,” Davis

says. “So, we select and train cattle to forage on the slopes.”

Compared to most other ranches, the Sisquoc strategy gives retained heifers an extra year, growing and learning to make a living before they must raise their own calves in harmony with nature. Prior to 2002, the standard 2-year-old calves seemed unprepared for diverse grazing and tended to fall out before delivering a second calf.

“We can keep our good cows in the herd longer if we have some patience getting them started,” Holt says.

Cowboys move salt and feeders with a natural mineral mix to encourage even grazing in the highlands, and sometimes they herd cattle to fresh grass. “Because of the rough country, most of our work is done on horseback,” Davis says.

He knows every acre of it and enjoys the environment, including the secluded line shack used when there are jobs to do far from headquarters, or sometimes for hunting game. “It’s a place to dry out and warm up, but also a fun place to be,” Davis says. “I always feel like staying a while.”

The environment is a big issue in the Golden State, partly because



of the many recurring crises there. “One of the biggest fires in California history clipped 6,000 acres of our place last summer,” Davis says. “We had to coordinate with the firefighters and also try to minimize their impact on the ranch.”

A group of feeder heifers had to be moved four times to keep out of the smoke, but “between that and helicopter over-flights, we know they were stressed,” he says. “They were the only calves that had a greater than 5% fallout from the Natural program.”

That was after the sale to Beef Management Group (BMG) and placement in the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Thomas County Feeders, Colby, Kan. BMG operates a *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand Natural supply chain for Tyson Fresh Meats.

Davis remembers a few years earlier, when another natural phenomenon rocked the ranch.

“It was just bluebird weather, and I was driving my pickup along when I thought I had a flat tire — then I thought I had four flat tires,” he recalls. “I looked out and thought the wind had come up, the way the trees were moving. Of course, about that time, I realized it was an earthquake. We had some minor damage, such as stock tanks broken apart, but it didn’t last long enough to stress the cattle.”

Since 2002, Rancho Sisquoc has operated as a closed herd, using only its own calves as stockers to graze the remote regions.

“Our own calves are calmer, and we know the quality keeps getting better,” Davis says. About 90% of the bulls used today are registered Angus, and the youngest cows feature the highest quality. These are the cows whose calves are most likely to achieve CAB Natural acceptance.

To build upon current success, a group of 60 top replacement heifers were heat-synchronized and artificially inseminated (AIed) last fall. “It’s the first time we have used AI,” Davis says. All were bred to the same bull, with a son used for cleanup breeding.

The next step will include sorting replacements based on feedlot and carcass potential as well as functionality on the ranch. Davis sees value in maintaining some level of crossbreeding in the herd, but the few Gelbvieh and Balancer bulls currently in the battery are used mainly as terminal sires on older cows. The Angus breed offers predictability and a helpful array of genetic selection tools, he notes.

Proactive health care includes vaccination at 90 days and again just before weaning, and then fenceline contact between calves and cows when they must be separated. “We do everything we can to ease the stress,” Davis says. “That could be why 99% of our calves remain in the Natural program all the way to harvest.”

Caring for cattle means watching them closely and treating any sick ones with the best veterinary treatment, usually antibiotics. Of course, those few calves are not eligible for CAB Natural. “We notch

the tag and enter them into the computer system,” Davis says, but they typically recover and are sold as commodity cattle.

“We care for all the cattle, but our highest calling is to raise them to fit consumer demand in every way,” he says. “I like a great ribeye, and it gives me a lot of satisfaction to know that our cattle produce the beef that I like.”



Davis moves bred heifers up a tree-lined alley to fresh pasture.