

# Great returns for Vella's Santa Gertrudis cross

BY MATT SHERRINGTON

## BUSINESS PROFILE

IT WAS with the notion of not putting all their eggs into one basket, that led the Vella family, owners of the highly successful company, Vella Wines, to expand into cross-bred cattle production with a Santa Gertrudis breeding herd in 2016.

Mark and Jen Vella run the program at their property on Sheoak Hill Road, in Mt Torrens (purchased in 2018), which is run under the banner of Vella Pastoral, with their sons Braydon and Rhys.

The Vella's interest in Santa Gertrudis began when they were both growing up in Queensland, with the breeds' naturally quiet temperament, hybrid vigour, look, and carcase structure standing out to them.

"We introduced Santas, on agistment, in 2016, and began joining Angus bulls to our Santa cows at that time," Mr Vella said.

"The first-cross calves produced are rippling, big framed sappy black cattle, with massive growth rates, which command a premium in the South Australian saleyards. Combining Santa cows, with large carcase frames and hybrid vigour, with Angus bulls leads to excellent progeny being produced."

The Vella's run a fixed joining program, which they're hoping to whittle down to eight weeks by next year.

"We were leaving the bulls in for four months, in 2021, and we've gotten that down to two and a half months this year. The aim with getting down to two months is so that the breeders are ideally



**SUPER SANTAS:** Jen Vella, Vella Pastoral, Mt Torrens, with Santa Gertrudis cow, Nikki. Mrs Vella looks after the day to day running of the cattle program, while Mr Vella, looks after the wine business. Photo: Alisha Fogden.

calving now, when conditions are best, as opposed to another two months time."

Mr Vella said while they're quite stringent on culling non-performing cows, they have kept a few of their better breeders, which may have missed the last joining window, for another year to bring them all into line.

"We preg-tested our cows just recently, which came back at 98 per cent PTIC."

The Vella's predominantly sell the first-cross progeny through the Strathalbyn Saleyards at six to seven months-old and 300 to 350kg.

"We're receiving our best ever returns. We recently sold 30 steers for 693c/kg and 20 heifers for 625c/kg."

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**Mark Vella, Vella Pastoral, Mt Torrens.**

The Vella's are happy with how the operation is running.

"We rotate the bulls after six weeks to ensure everything is going well. This seems to be working with the conception rate we're striking. We've been excited by the results so far."

Mr Vella said they receive high annual rainfall on the

Adelaide Hills property, which consists of high quality grazing and mixed farming country utilised for barley and oats crops to produce silage for their herd.

"The breeders are looking fantastic. They're as fat as houses. We have them on a diet now as they're calving in two months, and may have too much conditioning."



**IN DEMAND:** The Vellas' first-cross calves net a premium at the saleyards. Photo: Emily Doering.