

World record prices paid for Red Devon Cows in the United States of America

From New Zealand to the USA: Ken McDowall's Red Devon journey

Story courtesy of Jon Morgan

For almost 30 years Ken McDowall worked on Rotokawa Farm at Whanganui, managing the sheep flock and a beef herd for its owner. A quiet, unassuming man, his special interest was Rotokawa's Red Devon cattle, a minor breed in New Zealand but known for being docile, quick-growing and well-proportioned.

Then, one day out of the blue, a stocky, moustachioed American cattleman turned up. And Mr McDowall's life changed forever.

In a southern drawl, the man, who introduced himself as Gearld Fry, explained that he was on a mission to find the world's best Red Devon cattle. "And I do believe I've found them," he told Mr McDowall.

What followed was a sudden burst of fame for Ken and Rotokawa in American cattle grazing circles, that only a rock star propelled to overnight success could know.

But unlike the fickle showbiz world, his renown has only grown.

Among beef breeders and ranchers across 20 states of the United States and Canada, Ken is held in high esteem.

He is asked to speak at conferences, field days and workshops in New England each year.

At these, he is hailed as the man who has saved a dying cattle breed in America.

And because of this, others have been able to breathe new life into grass-fed beef breeding and give farmers the opportunity to open up new markets in restaurants, supermarkets and food co-operatives in New York and Boston.

To Mr McDowall, seven years on from that momentous visit by Mr Fry, it is still all a bit bewildering. "You think you're out in the backblocks in a little country and something like this falls out of the sky," he says.

"I have to pinch myself to be sure this is really happening."

He insists the plaudits are undeserved. "It's the cattle, not me," he says. "Everyone's just being nice."

"No, we're not," responds Ridgeway Shinn, the man who spent more than NZ\$1.3 million flying 89 Rotokawa Red Devons from New Zealand to New England. "Ken is an incredible breeder who spent 30 years perfecting a set of genes to act in a way everybody talks about but very few people succeed at."

This rare genetic achievement is called prepotency - the ability of a bull to consistently pass on its traits to its progeny.

Rotokawa calves, even those bred to cows of other breeds, are remarkably similar to each other. With an ability to efficiently transform grass into meat, called easy-fleshing by the Americans, they grow into well-muscled animals that produce tender, marbled meat.

They are also exceptionally hardy, thriving in the harsh Canadian winters and the hot, dry summers of the American Midwest.

The origins of Rotokawa's American upsurge can be traced back to 2002 when Mr Shinn, who farms at Hardwick, Massachusetts, identified a market for tasty grass-fed beef in New York and Boston.

He went looking for cattle to produce it, but consistent quality was hard to find. In the drive to produce meat solely on weight at the expense of quality on grain feed lots, individual cattle breeds had submerged into one motley breed.

He bought an ultrasound scanner and used it to find the animals with the best quality prime cuts with intramuscular fat that would be suited to grass-feeding.

The best of these were dominant in Red Devon genes and he isolated some good cows but could not find bulls of a high enough quality.

So, Mr Fry, an Arkansas beef genetics specialist, was sent on his mission.

When he got to New Zealand and the Rotokawa Stud he immediately phoned Mr Shinn saying excitedly, "I've found it, I've found it".

Mr Shinn recalls having to persuade Mr Fry to continue with the search in New Zealand and Australia. He did, but could not find better bulls than at Rotokawa.

Mr Shinn bought semen from Rotokawa and began breeding cows and then a year later imported 13 in-calf heifers and flushed their embryos to implant in other cows to rapidly introduce their genetics to US cattlemen.

As word got around, groups of curious farmers from the US and Canada began arriving on Mr McDowall's doorstep. They had heard Mr Fry and Mr Shinn at seminars extolling the virtues of grass-fed beef. "Walk into a paddock of Ken's bulls and it's like seeing a seven-foot-tall man standing in a room of five-foot men," Mr Fry told them.

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FIVE years later, Mr McDowall was ready to retire and the new farm manager was wanting to concentrate on farming commercially rather than stud breeding. Mr McDowall called Mr Shinn and asked if he wanted to buy the herd.

"I didn't hesitate; I said 'Yes'," Mr Shinn says.

But then he had to get the 89 bulls and cows to Massachusetts.

No-one had imported this many cattle to the US before and he had to build a special quarantine centre on a ranch at Santa Margarita, California. Mr McDowall had to quarantine the herd for 60 days in New Zealand first.

Flying them was best to keep loss of condition to a minimum and, accompanied by Mr McDowall, they were put into two 747 freighters for the 14-hour journey to Los Angeles.

After 45 days in quarantine and another two months recuperating, they were passed fit for the five-day truck journey across the country to Massachusetts.

Mr Shinn and his investment partners are convinced all the trouble and expense will be proved to have been worth it.

Two years after the imports arrived, cattle numbers are gradually increasing and interest in them is growing.

That "toe-in-the-water" auction of 12 females produced a top price, for a cow with a heifer calf at foot, of **NZ\$47,000**, which Mr McDowall says has to have at least doubled the Red Devon world record for a female.

The top three averaged **NZ\$34,000** and the average for the 12 animals was NZ\$14,300, well above prices paid for the best bulls of any breed at this year's Beef Expo, New Zealand's top cattle show.

However, this was a one-off as the Red Devon breeders are building herd numbers and keeping all their females. A few bulls have been sold to commercial farmers for around NZ\$14,000 but most sales are of semen straws.

America's two Red Devon organisations have 180 members, almost all using Rotokawa genetics to build a base from which to supply commercial ranchers. "We're still very tiny in the big picture of the US cattle business but people are beginning to pay attention to us," Mr Shinn says.

He has 160 Rotokawa cattle on his farm. He is also a co-owner of a small meat plant that kills about 15 beef animals a week and tracks the meat yield of each. The Rotokawa bulls have 3-5 per cent more meat in the high-value cuts. "It doesn't sound a lot but it's \$300 extra," he says.

Growing the market for that beef was slow-going until he had a flash of inspiration coming home from a trip talking to farmers in Pennsylvania.

"I was driving across the George Washington Bridge when I suddenly realised, 'Wow, I'm talking to the wrong people. It's the consumer I have to convince. Get them to understand it and then just get out of the way'."

After that, he began speaking to diners at Manhattan restaurants. "We organise a farmers' dinner, charge them \$100 a plate, and I get up and talk to them about the grass-fed beef they're eating. And, y'know, they don't want me to sit down. They're so ravenous to know what's going on."

In New Zealand, Mr McDowall, 69, keeps his hand in with one bull, kept behind in Whanganui as "insurance".

"Anything could have happened on that long journey to America. I would have hated to have landed there with no bull-power," he says. He has sold straws of semen to 14 countries with a vast range of climates.

The first Red Devons came in 1980 from the herd of retiring Rakaia breeders Graham and Helen Holmes, who had imported pure stock from England and Australia.

Mr McDowall added other bloodlines, taking seven years to develop the stud to where he felt confident about offering the cattle for sale. He developed five genetic lines, scrupulously avoiding inbreeding.

He prefers to trust his experienced eye, rather than rely on estimated breeding values, the beef industry's measurement of key performance traits - "They tend to encourage single-trait selections, which can be a recipe for disaster."

He selected on balanced conformation, holding his hands up to block off the back half of the animal when looking at the front and then reversing the process. Everything had to be in proportion, a judgment based on his years of experience. He looked for practical aspects of sound conformation, such as well-formed feet and legs and width from the hip to the pin bone, making sure the muscling went right down to the hock.

Decisions for the next mating would be made by studying newborn calves. "There was no point in waiting for growth figures to confirm what my eye already told me," he says.

"It's plain common sense. I didn't follow anything but my gut feeling, and it worked."

The cattle had an inherent hardiness, with seldom missed pregnancies, and he fostered this by refusing to ever feed them supplements, no matter what the weather conditions. He was ruthless in the pursuit of reliable prepotency. "It doesn't matter how perfect a bull looks. If he doesn't pass that on to the next generation, he's useless."

Proof of that ability has made Rotokawa famous in the US. Commercial ranchers use the bulls over their mixed-breed cows and see the Red Devon muscling - visible in raised loin muscle along the backbone - passed on to the progeny.

Statistics prove their eyes are not deceived. A study of all breeds of cattle killed in one meatworks in Missoula, Montana, showed the average eye fillet weighed 12lb (5.4kg) but the average of eye fillets from animals sired by Rotokawa Red Devon bulls of similar weight and age was 17lb (7.7kg).

Mr McDowall says he is constantly amazed at the turn his life has taken. "Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined this. Type Rotokawa Devon into Google and you get 741 results. Ten years ago you wouldn't have got one."