

Something's Good in Denmark

Finn and Jette Midtskogen: a European Angus success story.

by Eric Grant



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MIDTSKOGEN FAMILY

►A herd of Angus cows makes its way across a pasture owned by the Midtskogen family of Denmark. "The choice for us could not be anything but Aberdeen-Angus," Finn Midtskogen says.

Once the seat of Viking raiders, Denmark is now a home of Angus cattle. And much of the breed's rising popularity can be credited to the work of Finn and Jette Midtskogen.

The couple, who own and operate a farm with nearly two dozen Angus cows, believe the breed's future is bright in northern Europe, especially as more Danish producers are exposed to the breed's reproductive, growth and carcass traits.

"We believe in progress for the Angus cattle," Finn says. "We hope soon to be paid from the eating quality. In our breeding, we use marbling as an important thing and try as well to get rid of the outside fat."

Finn, 50, is a blacksmith and serves as chairman for a small company that makes stables. Jette, 47, is a clerk for Danish Crown, the largest slaughterhouse group in northern Europe. They have one daughter, Sine, 7, whom they adopted from China five years ago.

The Fruelund Farm, which the family purchased in 1988, consists of about 15 hectares (or about 37 acres), plus 10 hectares (24.7 acres) that the family leases. Most of the land is devoted to pasture and grass production, although about eight hectares is planted each year in spring barley.

The farm is located in Jutland in the western regions of Denmark, which is a small and beautiful country jutting into the North Sea and the Baltic Sea on the northern edge of Europe. It shares a common border with Germany.

The country's landmass is approximately 16,600 square miles, just less than twice the size of Massachusetts, and it claims about 5 million people in its population. The climate is temperate, with good rainfall and plentiful grass, although winters can be severe and windy, with short days because of its northerly location.

All told, Danish farmers own about 1.8 million head of cattle, of which 600,000 are dairy cows. "Totally, Denmark produces about 150,000 tonnes (metric tons) of beef per year, with a per-capita consumption of about 25 kilograms (about 55 pounds)," Finn says. "The remaining 20,000 tonnes of beef is sold to export markets."

A role for Angus

Denmark's primary dairy breeds include Holstein, Danish Jerseys and Danish Reds. The beef breeds are Limousin, Hereford, Charolais, Simmental, Aberdeen-Angus, Highland Cattle and Blonde d'Aquitaine.

Angus cattle have been in Denmark for more than 50 years, Finn says. The number has increased to about 10,000 total head of Angus



or Angus-cross, with about 2,000 of these being registered.

"The Danish beef breeders are getting more and more interested in Angus cattle," Finn says. "This is first and foremost due to the breed's high production capacity and a good marketing scheme for Angus beef over the last five to 10 years."

The breed works well in a number of production systems, Finn adds, and Danish producers have come to recognize the breed's competitive advantages in finishing, or fattening, systems.

In recent years, many Danish producers have shifted to organic beef production. This trend has been driven by increasing numbers of European consumers who've become concerned over how cattle are produced, managed and marketed.

Much of the country's Angus beef is marketed through the Friland Angus scheme, a branded beef program that markets beef from cattle produced from "free range" situations.

Friland prefers carcasses that are older than 16 months (mo.) of age and that possess excellent beef character. The beef is sold in cities to customers who have good incomes and desire a higher-quality, process-verified product. The remaining Angus cattle are sold directly to slaughterhouses, and the meat is not marketed as Angus.

"It should be noted that about 10% to 20% of all Angus beef is sold directly to consumers by the producer, often in quarters, at a fairly good price," Jette says. "Such animals are slaughtered at local — often small — slaughterhouses and controlled by veterinarians before sale."

Midtskogen Angus

After carefully evaluating several breeds of cattle, the family decided on Angus in the early 1990s. They bought their first Angus — three cows, a heifer and a bull — in 1992. "It took us about a year to find the right race — consider the advantages and the disadvantages," Finn says. "And the choice could not be anything but Aberdeen-Angus."

"We bought our first cows from a farm that had the old-type of Angus," he adds. "We felt it was the right way to learn about Angus cattle. They were not very expensive and a good way to learn by experience."

Since then the herd has increased to 20 cows, which means they had to construct new facilities to manage the additional numbers. They built a new barn, where their livestock could be sheltered during winter. Through genetic selection, the family also improved the performance and growth of their cattle.

"They have become a great



►Dedicated to Angus since the early 1990s, the Midtskogens' hard work is resulting in rising breed popularity among their countrymen. Seated are (from left) Finn, Sine and Jette Midtskogen.

deal bigger and heavier," Finn says. "The weight of the cows is now about 800 kg (1,600 lb.). Our winter feed consists of wrapped grass boxes (bales) for the cows and young stock, which also get concentrates. This year we are going to use our own barley, rolled, plus minerals."

The family has made extensive use of American and Canadian semen, although importation can be difficult due to Denmark's ban on cattle vaccinated for IBR.

"Three years ago we imported semen from Grand Island Elmo," Finn explains. "So this year we have some very promising young stock after him. In 2002, we artificially inseminated with SAF 598 Bando 5175, which we expect a lot from. Through our Association we have the possibility to use semen from Ankonian Elixir 100 and Summitcrest Prime Cut 1G42. Our herd bull is a son from Young Dale Monarch."

Because of the family's dedication to breeding top-flight animals, they've enjoyed tremendous success in the showing with their Angus cattle. Frueland Miranda — the family's top cow — was named Interbreed Winner for female animal at the National Show as a 2-year-old. As a cow with calf, she was selected as the best Angus cow in Denmark.

"We hope to breed more of her kind," Finn says.

Danish association

The Danish Angus Association is a small but enthusiastic group of breeders with about 200 members. Jette runs the magazine, *Angus Kontakt*, and is a member of the board.

"We are nine breeders who meet four times a year," Jette says. "There we feel at home and see what has happened since the last time we were there. We speak about topical subjects concerning farming and give and receive tips and ideas."

Finn estimates that there are about 1,100 Danish herds with Angus cattle, or about 3,100 head of purebred Angus cows and 800 head of crossbred cows that are 50% or more Angus.

The family, through its involvement in the association, maintains an "actively pedigreed herd," which is a system similar to many of the total inventory management programs being used by U.S. breed associations. "We weigh our calves at birth, at 200 days and again at 365 days," Finn says. "And besides that, we weigh them every fortnight (every two weeks) to follow the development of the calves. Who knows? Maybe we can make a mark on Angus breeding."

