

A Summary and Perspective on the AWA 2017 Conference

By Mike McGehan

On Sunday 30th April I departed on a wagyu pilgrimage to our cousins across the Tasman. The destination being the border town of Albury (NSW) for the 2017 Wagyu Expansion Australian Wagyu Association (AWA) Conference and Tour.

The conference consisted of three days of speakers followed by two days of touring around local operations however due to the ritual of opening weekend of duck shooting, I was only able to attend the first day of the tour.

Day one of the programme started with a welcome and general overview of the Wagyu industry, the conference was attended by over 400 delegates from around the world, with almost a third of these people had come to the industry over the preceding year. There were a couple of sessions on DNA testing and animal registrations. They also covered some of the recent advances in this area including SNP genotyping (DNA testing for various things). Part of this area included discussion on the newly approved Crossbred Wagyu Test (CWT) which gives a total Wagyu percentage. As a side note, Fullblood cattle have been found to come out anywhere between 70-100%!

That evening I attended a welcome cocktail party with a selection of Wagyu canapes and a good dose of local Australian refreshments courtesy of All Saints Winery. After making a number of new friends I decided to do my bit for Trans-Tasman relations and venture down to the local pub with a few fellow conference goers, although they were close to closing, they quickly welcomed us in and within an hour there were no less than 150 wagyu revelers comparing notes over an ale.



Day two had eight different speakers and was kicked off by Lisa Sharp, GM Communications of Meat & Livestock Australia. Lisa spoke about the move away from “paddock to plate” to new thinking of “plate to paddock”. She also mentioned that the US Wagyu industry is only 10% the size of that of Oz. Another keynote speaker on the second day was the new CEO of the AWA Dr Matt McDonagh. He mentioned the AWA has around \$1.8m-2m of income and at over 600 members is now the largest beef association in Oz, doubling in two years! As well as this the number of animals in Wagyu breedplan has gone from 7,700 in 2015 to 80,000 in 2017 and 20% of the breeders have 1,000 head.

Another speaker of note was Dr Rob Banks, a highly respected animal scientist. He managed to add some humour into what would otherwise have been a somewhat dry discussion on new advances in what he labelled “whizzo” technology including stem cells and cloning.

The last session of the day was a panel Q & A discussion on what people should focus on breeding FB, PB, FI+ or better. This question is something all farmers are dealing with and resonates with us back in NZ, I went into this thinking I would come out with a definite answer but this was not the case. For me the moral of the hour long session was again to focus on what you are good at, relating this back to the NZ industry is somewhat harder due to our scale and limited market opportunities.



The day was followed by a gala dinner again featuring a number of wagyu delicacies and of course more of the All Saints plonk from the prior evening. There was entertainment from Sara Storer the 2017 Female Artist of the Year at the Tamworth Golden Guitar Awards. The evening was rounded out by yet another trip to the local tap house for more Trans-Tasman banter, this time however they were ready for us, having organized a band and open only to conference delegates, of which it felt like the whole conference had turned up.

The final day of the conference was focussed on a major part of the Oz industry, FI breeding with Holstein and Angus cattle. While I found there were some similarities with what we could/are doing here (eg Firstlight), by and large this part of the Oz industry utilizes feed-lotting cattle on grain based diets for varying lengths of time which I feel is not an area where NZ can compete (on a cost basis).

The last session in the morning featured the unveiling of the new Japanese Carcase camera presented by Professor Keigo Kuchida. The new camera takes a photo and links with the cloud for instantaneous data analysis. He also spoke of the importance of not only marbling but marble fineness, with the Japanese moving to a New Fineness Index (NFI).

The afternoon featured an Elite Wagyu sale with 48 lots on offer. The auction was run in an auditorium with buyers present in the room, via phone and online. This was an eye opening experience with prior records smashed and even Australian all breeds records broken. The top bull was an R3 bred by Mayura Station sold for \$105,000, he had a Fullblood Terminal Index (FTI) of \$395.



The top female sold wasn't even born yet at the time of the auction; a sexed semen heifer with delivery at 90 days of age, the top bid being \$95,000, with an FTI of \$571, this would be the highest mid parent female in the world (sire Michifuku F126, dam Macquarie F D2041).

Last but by no means least, a package of 10 semen straws from the 2nd highest ranked bull in Breedplan with an FTI of \$595 who is now deceased sold for a staggering \$28,000 PER STRAW, both this package and the heifer above were sold to a South African breeder. Obviously this called for celebrations and the day wouldn't have been complete without a visit to the now infamous "Beer Deluxe" aka Paddys Bar, again it felt like most of the conference was present despite the early start required the following morning.

With a quick breakfast at my new favourite and aptly named "Early Bird Café" and with coffee in hand we were ushered onto 3 buses for the days tour, although fully booked and limited to 180 people, being the token kiwi who booked the conference last minute and obviously due to prior nights' friend making and influencing people, I was granted a special entry ticket! I was also lucky enough to sit next to the aforementioned CEO of the AWA Dr Matt McDonagh for the day. I utilized this opportunity to pick his brains on the industry and where it is going, his background as a scientist specializing in the marbling of meat and by the end of the day I had decided he was a GB.



The tour kicked off by visiting local breeder Goorambat Wagyu/Global Reproduction Services owned by Dom & Jo Bayard. Some of their sires are available here in NZ (Double Sixty, Mr Marble). Dom and Jo have an impressive operation and are also involved in some next generation DNA profiling in a joint venture they are doing in a purpose built lab on farm. This was followed by yet another great lunch at the local Baileys Winery in Glenrowan and then onto Moyhu Wagyu where they are mainly grass fed however they also have a small feedlot.

The final stop on the days tour was to All Saints Castle for an impressive dinner in their barrel room, this was essentially the close of the week despite another tour the following day. Despite numerous attempts from new friends to repeat prior nights' festivities, having to leave on a 3 hour drive to Melbourne at 5am the following morning meant I gave Paddys a miss with a wiser head prevailing.

All in all, I had an amazing 5 days. I was blown away by the hospitality shown to me over the course of the trip, the content of the conference including speakers who were excellent and it was run like a well-oiled machine courtesy of an event management company.

On reflection, our own industry on the other side of the Tasman although many times smaller (as I see it more nimble), would benefit from a closer association with our friends across the ditch. We have a number of strengths that set us apart that we should build on including our own story to develop and take to the consumers of NZ and the world.