



Full Circle

Donati Ranch Angus grows from a commercial cow-calf operation to a leading seedstock operation in California.

by Kayla Jennings

Sounds of chatter from Angus breeders young and old paired with the aroma of beef cooking above an open fire is a familiar welcome to bull sale attendees. Before long, some opening remarks precede the start of an auctioneer's chant.

In the end, the gavel falls, and more than 140 registered Angus bulls are on their way to new zip codes. On the second Thursday each September, what evolved from a 4-H project is now an established Angus seedstock operation situated at the edge of the Sacramento Valley and the Sierra Nevada foothills.

On the homepage of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) website it says, "National Junior Angus Association members are our strong foundation for expansion and improvement for the Angus breed in the future." That sentiment could not be truer at Donati Ranch Angus.

Founders Tom and Sally Donati grew up in commercial beef cattle production, and the ranch remains a family operation with the help

of son, Rocky; his wife, Lisa; and their three children, Nico, Gemma and Leo. Today, in addition to their registered Angus cow herd, the family also manages an extensive rice farming enterprise.

For Tom, this is exactly how he hoped it would turn out.

"It means a lot because you try to build it, and then it's so rewarding when someone wants to take it on and keep it going."

Deep roots

Long before hosting an annual bull sale, Donati Ranch Angus was an early participant in the Young Sire Evaluation Program in cooperation with the American Angus Association through their commercial herd in the 1980s. Tom says that experience solidified the value of receiving performance and carcass data on progeny as a tool in genetic selection then and now — grading 63% Prime in the last couple of years.

"We still have the same emphasis in producing good calves with good

carcass data as we did then," Tom says. "Our consumer is what we need to satisfy. They've got to have a good experience eating beef."

The same sentiment of excellence in performance, structure and fertility holds true on the maternal side. Years of Pathfinder® Cows who have come out of this program illustrate their vision perfectly.

"We don't keep them unless we want to use them on our own herd," Tom says. "Maternal is absolutely as much as important as the carcass traits, so we just have to look at making a balanced female, but yet still produce a good steer for carcass quality."

In the spirit of involving the next generation in this process, Tom and Sally's two sons, Rocky and Chris, were diving into a 4-H heifer project in the 1990s. The first cows came from Tehama Angus, Tom recalls.

As their project grew, the registered Angus bull calves were used in the Donati Ranch Angus commercial herd. Before long, the

ranch began marketing bulls to commercial producers in private treaty and sales like the Black Gold Bull Sale.

"There's a lot of the families that have been with us for over 25 years when we first started who come to the sale at the ranch today," Rocky says. "It is nice that the customers believe in our program as much as they do, what we're doing and everything goes forward."

It is the importance of relationships like these that Rocky, and now his children, have gleaned from the NJAA.

"As I had kids, from my involvement in it, I realized it is important for them to get out and see some of this other country and see what's going on in the rest of the world," Rocky reflects. "You kind of learn at a young age the importance of networking with people."

His son Nico finds that true, too.

"The sense of community I felt has never died away," Nico adds. "It's been something that's always been the coolest thing to me about being in this industry. It's the heritage and it's the community, because it doesn't matter what state you're in. We raise the same breed; we face the same problems; and we're all together because of it. That's our strength."

Jump-starting juniors

That strong sense of community in the Angus breed started with a 56-hour drive to a junior national in Perry, Ga., in the '90s. It was a memorable trip for the whole family, and a first taste of engaging with producers from across the country for Rocky and his brother, Chris.

"Then I got involved with going to the LEAD [Leaders Engaged in Angus Development] conferences back then," Rocky says. "It was fun to go and see different parts of the country, and to see the diversity of how the

cattle can be raised so many different ways and still achieve the same goal or goals for your area."

Of all the lasting experiences he had during his time in the junior program, Rocky notes Washington, D.C., as his most defining and memorable trip.

"I remember walking the halls and seeing different doors were open and you see some legislative figures ... at the time," he remembers. "You witness what's really going on, running the country. You don't see

that very often, so it was a pretty big eye opener."

After graduating, Rocky took those lessons into adult life with leadership involvement in his local and state farm bureau as well as the county planning commission, among other civic responsibilities.

With Rocky's encouragement, it was a no-brainer for Nico to jump right in. For him, the hands-on experiences during the LEAD conferences, like shadowing a

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The third generation of the Donati operation is actively involved in the day-to-day activities of running a cattle ranch.

veterinarian to study bovine anatomy or exploring different cattle producing regions, grew his passion for the beef cattle industry even more.

Beyond tangible learning, soft skills Rocky and Nico fostered through NJAA are still serving them today. Rocky recalls how even challenging moments are valuable and prompt personal growth.

“Sometimes even when you don’t get the office or get the position, it’s still a big learning experience,” Rocky says. “You learn a lot about yourself and a lot about other people by going for those positions.”

Nico has experienced that growth firsthand as he took a seed planted through NJAA into other organizations like FFA, holding various officer positions in the regional and state levels. Even today, Nico is in every student organization available to him to continue fostering strong leadership skills to apply in the agricultural industry one day.

The harvest

Though new challenges and passions are always growing, Donati Ranch Angus takes pride in being a family-run operation that is based in production agriculture.

For Tom, the multigenerational aspect is truly special.

A Jumpstart

The Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) Conference offers a dynamic schedule filled with educational tours and industry-focused learning opportunities. Junior members will have the chance to connect with more than 100 Angus juniors from across the country. This conference allows participants to explore diverse regions, experience agriculture from new perspectives and see Angus cattle in unique environments across different parts of the country.

The 2026 LEAD Conference will take place in Orlando, Fla., July 28-31, 2026. This conference offers team building, leadership and character development as well as fostering new and old friendships between members. Cost of attendance is \$250.

- **Early Registration Deadline: June 1**
- **Late Registration Deadline: June 15**



“I mean, that’s the main thing,” he says. “Now we’re looking at succession and how to transition into that, but it’s really rewarding to have everybody involved in it. It means everything.”

The trio credits this ingrained passion in their family to involving the next generation in every way possible while maintaining a positive attitude. Those in agriculture know better than most how low valleys can get at times, Tom says to avoid emphasizing that too much.

“Even in my childhood, my father kept us involved and we learned at a

young age and enjoyed it,” he says. “You’ve got to show the next generation the good side and the bad side, but don’t emphasize the bad so much as they’re growing up, so they see some of the good things that are always out there.”

He says the cattle market right now is more conducive than ever for young producers to enter agriculture, so he encourages families to harness the opportunity to lower the average age of farmers and ranchers. From his perspective, there is more incentive now than ever before — and Nico hopes to embrace the opportunity upon graduation.

“For me it’s about the lifestyle and it being multigenerational,” Nico says. “Something about us producing food and growing our own food is amazing. It’s really satisfying. But doing that on ground that has been touched by multiple hands in your family, that makes it really special to me.” [AJ](#)

EDITOR’S NOTE: Kayla Jennings is a freelance writer from Throckmorton, Texas.

