



**The Nelson family:  
Barbara and Joe,  
Kayla and Matt.**

# “An Excellent Combination”

**A Minnesota breeder expresses his preference for the Simmental x Angus F1 cross.**

*By Dan Rieder*

“In our herd of 200 cows, we keep some straight bred Angus and purebred Simmental, but we just love those F1 half Angus-half Simmental crosses,” says Joe Nelson, of Nelson Family Farms, Mabel, Minnesota. “The two together make an excellent combination of genetics.”

He quickly checks off a mental list of advantages. “To be honest with you, they’re easier to take care of — nice udders, real docile dispositions, they flush real easy, and when you get them into the feedlot, they perform,” he stated. “The Simmental adds growth, while the Angus side of the pedigree brings marbling and a larger battery of available genetics from the bull side.”

Nelson observes the increasing popularity of the Sim-Angus phenomenon from several vantage points. Not only does he maintain a cowherd, a back-grounding operation and stocker program, but the family also

owns auction barns in nearby Lanesboro, Minnesota and Decorah, Iowa. In addition, his son, Matt, is the owner-operator of a 2,500-head feedlot, just across the state line in Iowa.

“We have seen how these cattle perform at every step along the way. Simmie-Angus F1 crosses are vigorous and trouble-free on the farm, finish efficiently in the feedlot, and are in great demand by these packer buyers,” he explained.

Nelson grew up in the area with three brothers and two sisters. His dad, Sylvan, passed away 14 years ago, but his mother, Charlotte, still lives on the family farm, currently operated by his brother, Robert. “We had a commercial cattle and hog farm beginning in the 1960s. We’d always had a few crossbred Simmental, Angus and Charolais cattle, so I’d been exposed to the obvious benefits of hybrid vigor very early,” he said.

“We have always tried to maintain something of a balance between our Angus and Simmental herds, but over the past five years, we have stepped up our production of half-blood Sim-Angus,” he continued. “We breed both ways — Simmental bulls on Angus cows, and Angus bulls on Simmental females.”



**A shot of one of Nelson’s auction barns.**

## **The Business of Marketing**

Nelson oversees a marketing effort that includes his entire family, two nephews, and a sizeable work force of sale barn employees.

He’s developed a reliable market for SimAngus breeding stock, selling a dozen or more crossbred bulls annually. “We also believe that before long, we’ll start selling bred, F1 heifers because there is a definite market for them. Those F1 heifers should be just as easy to sell as their bull herdmates. I’m also a believer in breeding F1 bulls to F1 females — it opens up your genetic base by offering so many more choices,” he said.

The Nelsons sell 10 to 12 Sim-Angus bulls annually, usually by private treaty. Although this past year’s entire bull crop was consigned to the Midland Bull Test and Sale at Columbus, Montana. “We received some very good data out of that test.”

A promising show heifer market, under the watchful eyes of his daughter, Kayla, and his son, Matt, is in the formative stages. With an ambitious goal of selling up to 20 heifers a year, Kayla and Matt break them to lead and gentle them before turning them over to their youthful owners.

Nelson and his wife, Barbara, were married in 1984, and purchased their original 259-acre farm the following year. Since then, they have steadily added parcels of land as properties become available.

Today, they operate on more than 1,000 acres of deeded land, plus additional leased pasture.

In 1985, they acquired the Lanesboro Sales Commission, and in 2007, they purchased the Decorah Sales Commission, enterprises that dovetail nicely into their cow/calf, back-grounding and stocker operations, plus Matt’s feed yard.

“Between the two auction barns and private treaty sales, we’ll sell about 300,000 head a year — everything from fat cattle to feeders to a growing ‘natural beef’ niche to culls and canners. We pick up cattle for our stocker program and many of our backgrounder calves through our own auction sales. We ship those calves off to Matt, when they’re ready to be finished and then he funnels them back as fat cattle to be sold through our barns. We’re pretty self-contained from that standpoint,” he says.

“We get quite a few finished cattle from the naturally fed niche. Heterosis helps overcome banned implants and results in some very nice premiums,” he said. “We’ll sell 250 to 300 head of natural-fed cattle every week and we have buyers who come specifically to bid on natural beef.”

Southeastern Minnesota and Northeastern Iowa are areas with an abundance of medium-sized cattle operations in the 100-to-125-head range. “A lot of those people have extra feed, so they go ahead and use it to finish their own calves,” Nelson added. “When some of them are ready for processing, they bring them into one of our barns a few at a time, and take home a pretty nice check.”

## **Family Involvement**

Joe and Barb both grew up in the Mabel area, were high school sweethearts and have been married for 26 years. Barb, a registered nurse, was raised on a dairy farm, which is still in the family and is operated by her brother, Marvin Kuhn. She is employed by the Gundersen Lutheran Clinic in nearby Spring Grove.

Matt, who recently turned 25, earned a degree in Ag Business from South Dakota State University and is making good use of his education managing his feedlot. Kayla, 21, earned an Associate Degree in Ag Production and Animal Science from North East Iowa Community College in Calmar, Iowa, before returning to the farm. Both are partners in the Nelson operation. In addition to her responsibilities on the farm, Kayla works at both sale barns — clerking, weighing cattle, and working in the office.

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# “An Excellent Combination”

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**Barb and Joe look on as Kayla proudly exhibits her champion SimAngus heifer.**

All of Joe's siblings reside close to Mabel, and Barb's brother and two sisters are also located nearby. "Two of my nephews, Jesse Nelson and his younger brother, Erik, are valuable members of our staff. Jesse is our on-site manager of the Lanesboro Sale Barn, and Erik is my 'country man,' — serving as a field man, visiting producers all over Southeast Minnesota and Northeast Iowa," Joe explains.

He admits that he became more serious about the quality of his cattle herd when Matt and Kayla became more heavily involved with their youth projects. "We began to pick up some really good Simmental and Angus heifers, keeping the best ones and adding to them," he comments.

"The kids have always been involved and active in the 4-H and FFA program, and every summer we go to local shows, State Fairs, the American Royal in Kansas

City, North American International Livestock Exposition in Louisville, and the National Western Stock Show in Denver. This past year, Kayla won the Junior Simmental/Angus show in both Louisville and Denver," Joe says. "She has a terrific SimAngus heifer that won the Junior show at Louisville last year as a calf and also won the Iowa State Fair. Kayla will take her back to the Minnesota Beef Expo, Kansas City, and to Louisville this year. We plan to flush her and make her a part of our embryo transfer program."

Nelson advises commercial breeders to build their herds beginning with a strong female base. "They should start by buying the very best half-blood heifers they can possibly afford," he concluded. "Not only will they get that extra hybrid vigor boost, but their longevity in the herd will be as good as anything they can find." ♦