

THE CORSICAN CATTLE BREED

by Andrea GADDINI

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In Corsica, an island of Italian geographical and cultural area, but which has been part of France since 1769, a particularly rustic and long-lived breed of cattle is reared, which has managed to overcome centuries of adversity, thanks to its strength, and which still manages to defend itself despite the worldwide dominance of the other French meat-producing breeds.

The strength of this breed also gives it a low cost of breeding, thanks to its skill to live at pasture all year round, even in harsh environmental conditions, in the inland mountains of the island, in the maquis shrubland and in the bush.

Origin

The breed lives exclusively in Corsica, where in the 19th century it represented all the reared cattle. There are few reliable data on its origin: Francescu Casabianca, former director of the Corte Center of INRA (*Institut national de la recherche agronomique*), explains that the Corsican breed has a strong genetic affinity with the Sardinian breed, while there is a marked morphological resemblance to the Brown of the Atlas, still bred in Morocco with one million heads, in particular for the black face, the light dorsal stripe and the white udder.

The resemblance, especially of the coat, is also evident with other insular breeds of the Mediterranean, as well as the Sardinian also the Spanish Mallorquina and Menorquina, in the Balearic Islands.

According to others, the breed derives directly from the domestication of local wild bovines (aurochs). In 1913 Dechambre compared the Corsican breed to the brown cattle of the Cévennes, in the south of France, despite its greater body weight, for their reddish coat, stocky build and straight profile.

From 1921 Corsican cattle were used by the brothers Heinz and Lutz Heck, respectively directors of the Berlin and Munich zoos, to try to reconstitute the aurochs, the wild cattle that went extinct in the 1600s, by crossing animals of various breeds. Besides the Corsican, Heinz used the Hungarian Grey, the Highland, the Friesian and others, while Lutz crossed the Corsican, the Spanish Raza de Lidia (the one used for bullfighting), the Camargue, the White Park, the Highland and others.

The breed has been recognized as specific and described in detail since 1946 by Edmond Quittet of the French Ministry of Agriculture, in his book "*Les races bovines françaises*".

Since the 1950s, Corsican cattle have undergone heavy crossbreeding, first with dairy breeds, then with meat breeds, to improve their conformation and growth rate.

Population

In 2014, there were 617 fertile females (INRA data), but the actual census is difficult to quantify, due to the absence of a breed standard and the presence of animals which are crossbred but bear morphological characteristics similar to those typical of these cattle.

The total number of "real" Corsican cows, according to some breeders, is between 3,000 and 4,000 heads, other sources speak of 10,000 breeding cows at the beginning of the 2000s, but the count certainly includes crossbred specimens.

According to FAO DAD-IS (*Domestic Animal Diversity Information System*) data, as of June 21st, 2022 there were 5,220 animals, in steady decrease, with 46 bulls and 1,375 breeding cows, of which 69 in purity, in 296 herds.

The average consistency of the herds up to fifty years was of a few heads, while today they have an average of 60-70 specimens, probably due to the abandonment of small breeders, caused by the low profitability.

Morphological features

Live weight of bulls is 350-500 kg (770-1100 lbs), and for cows 200-300 kg (440-660 lbs). The withers height is very small, equal to 115 cm (45 in), but in the past it was even lower, on average 110 cm (43 in), and it has increased following crossbreedings with improved breeds.

There is no breed standard, nor a herd book, and the morphological characteristics are very variable. Consequently also the coat color is not constant and is not fixed, although it is frequently dark fawn with black or almost black extremities, or brindle (*sainado*), and in any case reddish, with shades of fawn or pale fawn (*geria*), with white dorsal stripe (*virunato*), tawny (*muvrado*, i.e. similar to the mouflon), white and reddish, but also black (*breno*), grey (*mudo*), dark grey (*bughju*), brown or black and white. Dark spots can be seen around the eyes, and in this case the animal is called *luccio*. The muzzle is pigmented or not, depending on the coat.

The difficult circulation between the various breeding areas on the island also determines a different distribution of coats: in the Castagniccia region the brown or red with black face (*mascarati*) prevail, in southern Corsica the brindle coats prevail, in the Balagne region the brown with white dorsal stripe are widespread.

The gait is loose, the head is small and expressive, the skeleton is light but solid, rather fine and slender. The chest is deep and the general appearance is that of a frail, harmonious and balanced animal. They are intelligent, lively, but calm-tempered cattle.

Also the horns have very variable dimensions, and are lyre-shaped in the female or crescent-shaped and oriented inwards, of a yellowish white color with a black or slate tip, and in some specimens they can be very large.

Production traits

The Corsican is a beef breed, in the past used throughout the island for draught. In 1913 Dechambre recounted having seen these cattle yoked to the ard plough, still in use at the time on the island, with excellent performance. The oxen from the Giussani region (in corso *Ghjunsani*) were particularly renowned, being more powerful than the others, for their height was huge, and much appreciated by the cowherds (in Corsican: *bujjaghj*).

Corsican cattle efficiently convert the scarce feed resources available on the pastures and also feed on foliage and fruits of trees and shrubs, including acorns and chestnuts and, thanks to their compact and robust conformation, they can move without difficulty in the rugged areas of the interior of the island.

Corsican cattle often use the numerous and popular beaches of the island as pasture, constituting in their own way a tourist attraction and a subject for photographs and films.

Milking is not practiced: in fact, traditional Corsican cheeses are made from sheep or goat milk, but the milk production of the cows is more than sufficient to wean one calf per year.

The main product is the **vitellu** (veal), slaughtered within eight months, raised on pasture with its mother, with an intense pink color, tending towards red, but still very tender, which also gives excellent results in salami manufacturing.

Another type is the **manzu**, slaughtered between 9 and 16 months, with darker and tastier meat. The term manzu is also used, improperly, to indicate the meat of animals less than 8 months old, raised on pasture, and therefore different from white veal. Another, less common product is beef from oxen, often obtained from bulls at the end of their reproductive career, fattened for slaughter. Some farmers find a significant commercial outlet on the *halal* market, intended for Islamic consumers.

The Corsican cow has a very easy calving, which does not require human intervention, and its strong maternal aptitude guarantees excellent growth of the calves, even in the mountainous interior areas of the island, in adverse environmental and climatic conditions, such as intense summer heat and very cold winters. Corsican cattle show excellent compensatory growth which allows them to recover quickly after food stress, such as those caused by the summer drought.

In Corsica there are no wolves but there have been attacks by foxes, which attack calves at the moment of birth, and feral dogs. In some areas there are problems of coexistence on pastures

with sheep and goats.

In the past, transhumance was widely practiced, but today it is declining due to the resistance of shepherds to remain in isolation for months, especially for young people. Traditionally, as for many other transhumant rustic breeds, the departure for the mountain pastures (*muntagnera* or *muntanera* in the Corsican language) is solicited by the cows themselves, as is also for the return to the plain, which usually takes place in October.

The *vitellettu*

The characterization of a high quality product is underway: it is called "*vitellettu*", i.e. a small mountain calf, 5-6 months old, with a carcass weight of 60-70 kg (130-1150 lbs), characterized by its typicality and adherence to the traditional pastoral system of the island.

At the moment the *vitellettu* is little known and commercialized, and an attempt is made to have a peak of production in the summer period, coinciding with the maximum demand for the inflow of tourists, programming the calvings for the months between December and February.

An attempt is being made to focus on extensive guided rearing, which takes place mainly on the maquis also in the context of its valorisation as a grazing area, started in 2011, and on the use of calves with both Corsican parents, to obtain, at scheme, a seal of quality.

The product characterization process is technically followed by the Institut de l'Élevage with the support of other public bodies, such as France Agrimer (*Établissement national des produits de l'agriculture et de la mer*), the Chambers of Agriculture and the Odarc (*Uffiziu di u Sviluppu Agriculu e Rurale di Corsica* meaning *Agricultural and Rural Development Office of Corsica*).

Conservation

The possibility of reconstituting a Corsican breed which retains its rustic characteristics is entrusted to animals reared extensively, above all in the inland areas of the island, adapted to graze in scrubland and mountain pastures.

These animals are a possible basis for the reconstitution of pure nuclei of the breed, but are however characterized by strong differences in morphology, in particular in the coats and in size, however very small. (*Denis*)

Another obstacle to recovery work is the fact that in the 1990s cattle reared in Corsica were automatically classified as Corsican, although they frequently had crossbred origins.

It was only in 1982 that a semen collection program from purebred bulls began, even though artificial insemination is not currently used.

In 2003, efforts were made to define a real standard of the breed, shared with the professional associations, and to enhance, in addition to meat, also other products, such as salamis.

The Corsican breed is today officially recognized as a local breed with a limited consistency, with the name of "*Razza vaccina Corsa*". Various public bodies have engaged in conservation work: INRA (currently INRAE, *Institut National de Recherche pour l'Agriculture, l'Alimentation et l'Environnement*), the Odarc with the mating management, while since 2010 the *Corsica Vaccaghja* association plays a leading role in conservation initiatives, taking care of the procedures for the recognition of the Corsican cattle breed.

In 2008, Corsican breeders joined under the collective brand "Corsicarne" which provides for a registered trademark and a specification of good practices, and which in any case is not limited to Corsican breed animals only.

In 2015, the Chambers of Agriculture implemented a management plan to maintain and develop the breed, to safeguard its genetic heritage, and to find stable and profitable commercial outlets for the meat produced.

The Corsican breed is included in the Slow Food Ark of Taste, which includes traditional products, local breeds, knowledge that has been preserved over time by the communities to which they belong.

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Jacques Abbatucci : the importance of autonomy

In Serra di Ferro, in southern Corsica, the Fil Di Rosa farm lies, run since 1986 by Jacques Abbatucci, who has been able to set up a modern promotion of the Corsican breed, focusing decisively on the online sale of the product, consisting mainly of veal, raised organically since 2000.

The product is supported by a peculiar image, namely by the specially selected brindle coat of the cattle, borne by about 60% of the cows, and by the "vache tigre" (tiger cow) brand registered in 2006 by Abbatucci.

The farmer is particularly attentive to the self-sufficiency of the farm, as regards the feeding of the livestock, the energy and technical means supply, the slaughtering and marketing of the meat.

Feed self-sufficiency has already been achieved: the approximately 300 cows graze all year round on the 600 hectares (1,235 ac) of the farm with additions of crushed barley, sorghum grass and natural meadow hay, all organic and farm-produced. Pregnant cows and those in the first months of nursing graze in the scrubland on the hills, where they also take advantage of the leaves of shrubs and trees, such as wild olive trees, strawberry trees, oaks, and then move to the plain pastures together with the calves close to weaning. Feeding on pasture throughout the year allows for meat with different flavors to be obtained in different seasons. The heifers are guided to the pasture by elderly cows, able to find the areas where the most appreciated herbs grow, depending on the period.

The animals are rather distrustful of strangers, also due to the prevailing life in the pasture, but too aggressive specimens are culled.

Also as regards the water supply, the farm is self-sufficient, so much so that the severe drought of summer 2022 did not cause any serious problems.

The first calving of the cows is at three years of age, and their producing life generally lasts up to 14-15 years with peaks up to 18 years, while the bulls begin their reproductive life around the age of two.

The soil fertilization is carried out with mixed manure, from poultry and horses, and the installation of a biogas plant is planned, with the possibility of fuelling the farm machines with biomethane.

The meat is mainly yielded from calves aged between 6 and 8 months, slaughtered in the farm abattoir, inaugurated in 2021, and processed in the adjacent cutting plant, which was appointed with the EEC health mark since 2007. The processing in the farm slaughterhouse guarantees the cattle very short transfers and therefore a greater respect for animal welfare.

The average maturation is ten days and the sale is carried out both in the company sales point, especially in the summer months, those with the greatest tourist inflow in Corsica, and online, despite the handicap of increased transport costs due to the insularity.

The prevailing scoring of carcasses is VR1, followed by VR2, but Abbatucci still does not like the Europ system (in France the "S" muscularity class is not activated), which favors the quantity of carcass meat over quality.

The meat of tiger calves is also used to produce sausages, after maturation with ferments expressly produced in Germany.

The company is also able to provide special catering throughout France, intended for parties with over one hundred people, in which the staff takes care of cooking a whole veal for 10-12 hours on an olive wood fire and of its portioning.

Jacques Abbatucci's brothers are also involved in the agri-food sector, Jean-Charles is a renowned wine producer and Henri runs a restaurant in which the brothers' products obviously have a preponderant space.

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