



Conlan Ranches California grazes its cattle on nearly 1,300 of privately-owned rangeland in Marin County. Commercial Wagyu-bred cows are pictured here grazing on its Magna Terra Ranch.

Learning the Ropes, Paving New Paths

Young rancher carrying on family legacy

by Stevie Ipsen, director of communications, California Cattlemen's Association

CRCA

For many California ranching families, tradition runs several generations deep. For **Conlan Ranches California (Conlan Ranches)**, Valley Ford, ranching is certainly a family tradition but not necessarily in the conventional sense.

When **Ione Conlan**, Valley Ford, became a widow in 2001, she had no idea what was in store for her. She faced seven years of probate litigation and ultimately emerged with the two ranches that were owned and adored by her and her late husband, Garth. Following Garth's passing, the ranches were managed outside the family and when Conlan decided to enter the cattle business herself, she was left with 1,300 acres of neglected cattle and stock ponds, overgrazed pastures, fences that were practically nonexistent and endless amounts of deferred maintenance.

Today, Conlan, with the help of her 28-year-old great nephew, **Guido Frosini**, is an experienced cattlegirl and ranching advocate who raises a relatively uncommon breed of beef cattle in the United States – Wagyu, better known by food connoisseurs for the Kobe-style beef they yield.

Together, Conlan and Frosini cleaned up the land. They planted grass and trees where needed, fenced off streams, built fences, cleaned stock ponds, culled the cowherd and established a top-quality full-blood Wagyu, which can no longer be exported from Japan.

When asked what it means to have another generation of family as passionate about the land and lifestyle as her late husband was, Conlan, who is generally energetic and enthusiastic, gets quiet. "It means a lot," she simply states while choking up.

Born and raised in Florence, Italy, Frosini, though young, is well-traveled. In addition to his upbringing in Italy, he has spent a great deal of time in France, Spain, Mexico and even took a cross-country road trip in the U.S. when he was 18 years old. In all the places he has been, Frosini said visits to his aunt and uncle's ranch in Marin County were always something he enjoyed.

"Those visits provided experiences I'd never have gotten elsewhere," Frosini said. "To some people, ranching practices seem routine but for me, it was unique and made me curious."

After completing high school in Italy, Frosini studied Political Theory at the University of San Francisco. Being near family, he was able to visit the Conlan's Magna Terra Ranch frequently. After finishing his bachelor's degree, Frosini said he approached his aunt and told her he was interested in growing food and wanted to learn more about the ranch.

Conlan says she was thrilled to have a relative interested in continuing the legacy that she and Garth started. Though Frosini was interested in the ranch, he had no experience. Conlan told him he was going to need to go to back to school and learn the basics of ranch management, including the basics of animal husbandry and natural resources management.

"Guido has always been very intelligent. He was able to teach himself things like fixing equipment and driving a tractor," Conlan said. "For other things, he sought the help of people who understood land management and cattle production."

Frosini enrolled at Santa Rosa Junior College where, in addition to learning about cattle production, he learned a great deal about things from strawberry production to grass management.

He even learned to weld. In addition to the classes he took, Frosini also surrounded himself with some of the beef industry's most respected animal health and handling experts.

Frosini says since no two operations are exactly the same, he tries to take a little knowledge from everyone he meets. He has spent time with rotational grazing expert and Nebraska rancher Chad Peterson; learned about forage management and stocking rates from grazing specialist Nate Chisholm; animal health and handling from Bruce Hoffman, DVM, and **John Maas, DVM**, as well as many other knowledgeable individuals.

"Everyone has individual strengths and I think agriculture is one of the best fields to learn from and teach others," Frosini said.

Today, anyone who talks to Frosini would never know he has only been raising cattle for a few short years. He is able to carry on a conversation about grass patterns and nutrients, calving seasons and animal handling with anyone in the beef or natural resources communities. He is also able to explain those topics to anyone, whether cowboy, vegetarian, animal rights activist or politician.

Frosini also worked as an intern on a Wagyu ranch in Hawaii where he was able to gain hands-on experience in a very different climate. As a result of his various learning experiences, he has changed the operation's calving from fall to spring in order to meet the nutritional demands of young calves, and has implemented intense rotational grazing on Conlan Ranches' Magna Terra Ranch, which is just outside Petaluma bordering the Estero Americano water front.

One of the largest undertakings of the operation has been working to keep the pastures "Certified Organic" since 2006. Frosini says he recognizes that fitting into niche markets isn't right for every ranch or every cowherd, but that in his area, the effort to keep the land organic has been a good move.

"I understand that being organic doesn't work for everyone. We moved our herd to organic shortly after certifying the pastures and it was hard on the cattle, and hard on us," Frosini

explained. "It's expensive and time-intensive. If other people can make an organic herd work, that's great. For our situation, we had to go a different route with the cattle and it's working for us."

Frosini said the main limiting factor in keeping the cattle certified organic is that there is not a Certified Organic cut-and-wrap slaughter facility within 100 miles, as required for the certification. But, Frosini says the cattle are still raised organic and 100 percent grass-fed and grass-finished and is marketed that way when sold off-the-hoof to customers.

In addition to selling top-quality beef from the ranch, Frosini is also in the seedstock business, selling full-blood Wagyu bulls private treaty to commercial cattle producers. Known for their calving-ease traits, Frosini says Wagyu bulls are a win-win for commercial beef producers. Not only does their incredible marbling ability add to the palatability of any beef breed, first-calf heifers virtually have no dystocia problems when bred to Wagyu bulls.

In Marin County, farmers and ranchers are in a prime location to fit in to niche markets. Aside from raising full blood and F1 Wagyu cattle and Wagyu-Angus cross cattle, Frosini has become quite diversified. Conlan Ranches California meets the demand for locally-raised food. In addition to cattle, the ranch is home to chickens, geese, ducks, pigs, rabbits, sheep, all of which enhance the landscape and productivity of the property.

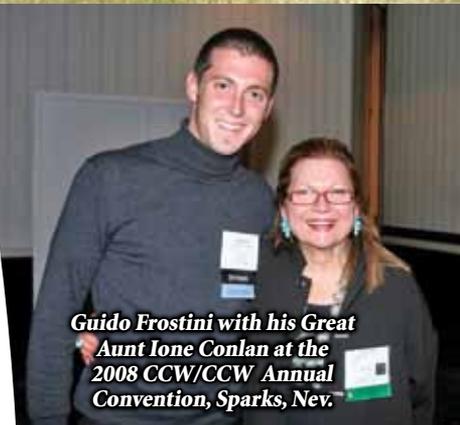
For example, in the past, goats have been placed in certain areas on the ranch to clean up fire hazard brush and pigs are used to "disk" the areas where farmer's market crops are grown. The products from these animals are served on ranch tours and sold at local farmer's markets. On his own ranch, **True Grass Farms**, Frosini also raises a variety of crops including organic blueberries and a variety of pumpkin and squashes.

Being relatively new to agricultural production himself, Frosini finds it important to share with the public what farmers do and how food is

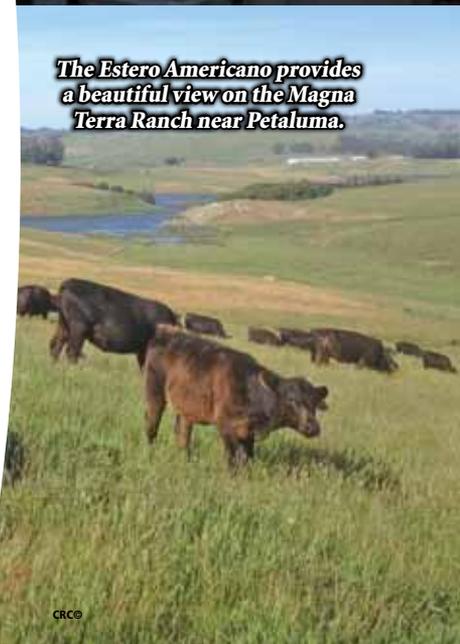
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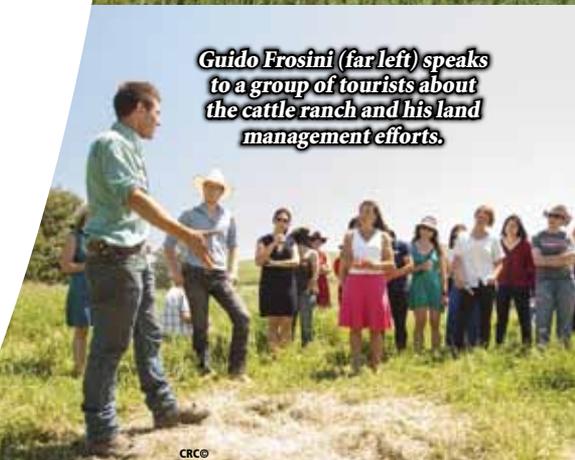
Conlan Ranches California has one of the largest Wagyu herds in the United States.



Guido Frosini with his Great Aunt Ione Conlan at the 2008 CCW/CCW Annual Convention, Sparks, Nev.



The Estero Americano provides a beautiful view on the Magna Terra Ranch near Petaluma.



Guido Frosini (far left) speaks to a group of tourists about the cattle ranch and his land management efforts.

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raised. Conlan Ranches has hosted a variety of educational tours, complete with samplings from the products they raise.

“I like to help people feel a connection to what we are doing,” Frosini said. “We are taking responsibility for the landscape and when you share that with those who don’t understand agriculture, it helps them appreciate their food and the people working to raise it.”

Being on the coast and being bombarded with regulation and the threats from opposition groups, Frosini and Conlan realize that being proactive on issues is imperative to their way of life. They take seriously producer education and certification programs that are available, including Beef Quality Assurance, Animal Welfare Approved and American Grass Fed. They are also involved

in groups like Marin Organics, the Organic Trade Association and many others.

Conlan’s agricultural and civic participation is something she says is crucial to staying in business. She has learned that when your family business is involved you have to be at the table or you are going to be on the menu.

“It’s been difficult to stay on top of all the issues we have been faced with. Whether it is the estate tax, land use battles or defending our way of life to the California Coastal Commission, we have learned that you constantly have to play an active role if you expect to stay in this business,” Conlan said.

While we all may learn from those who play an integral role in our lives – mothers, fathers, siblings and grandparents – the relationship

between Frosini and Conlan is evidence that their ranch is truly a family affair.

As for the future of her ranch, Conlan said she is confident that with Frosini’s stewardship and commitment, the ranch, which has been in the family since 1867, will continue to stay in the family because it is as dear to Frosini as it has been to her and Garth.

“I appreciate this lifestyle because of the return you get on your investment,” Frosini said. “It’s hard. It’s stressful, but when the weather is good and the cows are happy, everything is great. For me, it’s really about seeing people come together and enjoy food I raised. It’s a wonderful way to live.”

To learn more about their ranch philosophies, tours and upcoming farmer’s markets, visit www.truegrassfarms.com.