

Spanish success at all three levels

When it comes to pig production in Europe, Spain is regarded as one of the countries to the fore and, when it comes to pig breeding, ACMC are seen to be one of the leaders.

To see what happens when these two come together International Pig Topics recently visited the Aranda de Duero region of Spain to see ACMC stock at Marcial Chico's operation.

The history of this pig producing business goes back to 1965 when the father of the current owners dealt in pigs as the middle man between the farmers and the slaughter house. In the mid 1980s consolidation started to occur and the big pork producing companies just bought weaners from 10-200 sow supply units that tended to be linked to feed mills.

Rapid growth in breeders

In the late 1980s the company slaughtered some 50,000 pigs a year, of which 20% were from home produced weaners and 80% were from imported weaners which, needless to say, represented a real health risk.

In 1989 Marcial Chico, who were by that time into breeding, purchased their first grandparent stock from the British breeder NPD and by 1991 they were operating an AI station that supplied semen to others in the group. By 1999 sow numbers had increased to 6,000 from the 300 or so that



An incoming batch of new ACMC gilts in a hardening off pen.

were owned a decade earlier. Another fact that influenced this swing in sow ownership was the retirement of the founding generation of independent pig breeders and the fact that they were not succeeded by their sons who sought a brighter lifestyle in cities such as Madrid.

In essence, if Marcial Chico had not gone into breeding, their source of weaners would have dried up!

At the time they went into breeding the

market was researched and NPD and the Curtis family came out on top because of their pigs and also because of the 'people factors' involved.

Then NPD was sold and the pigs that took their place were inferior in terms of FCR and production costs.

Marcial Chico's prayers were answered when ACMC was created by the Curtis family and their company became one of

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Left, the isolated nucleus unit and, right, the new breeder farm that we visited.





Sow accommodation. Note, below right, the special feeders that can manage feed intake in early gestation.

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 ACMC's first overseas customers. FCR and production cost figures immediately returned to former levels and the ACMC stock was producing a better carcass with a bit more marbling that was better suited for the Spanish market.

Best ever FCRs

To top this off the sow's reproductive performance was first class and the commercial generation Vantage had no problems reaching the preferred 115kg slaughter weight. Meat was dark and the key joints of loin and leg were of a good size.

In fact, the ACMC stock gave a €30 cents advantage per kilogram.

When it came to performance the local testing at government stations produced FCRs that were the best they had ever seen!

Nowadays, Marcial Chico operates an ACMC nucleus herd of 50 great grandparent Meidam sows, which are batch farrowed and inseminated with semen that is shipped in from the UK every three weeks, and some 500 grandparent sows.

In addition, some 40 Volante boars are imported each year in two shipments.

At the commercial breeding level Marcial Chico are just completing the stocking of a new purpose built farm which is a sows only farm, that is, all inseminations are by AI.

Typically, 90 or so ACI gilts go into the unit every three months. These are all vaccinated and vasectomised boars are used for heat detection.

Nowadays, gilts are not served until 8.5 months and the extra costs associated with this are more than paid back by improved litter size and increased sow longevity.

First boar contact results in some 60% of gilts being detected in heat and the remainder invariably come into heat by feeding them just one kilogram of feed a day for a week and then putting them immediately on to ad lib feed.

An interesting issue in Spain is the hot summers that occur there. The negative effects on breeding that these can cause are largely negated by natural ventilation and the vasectomised boars that are strategically placed among the sows.

The former is cheaper than fans and can not fail, whereas the latter provides extra



beneficial stimuli to the sows. Sows remain in confined housing until they are confirmed as being in pig and then they go into loose housing, which more than complies with imminent EU legislation. Sows are typically into loose housing after 35-42 days.

One of the interesting dilemmas in Spain is the need to move to more eco and welfare friendly open housing, yet barley straw costs

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Good gilt uniformity. Note the loose housing, the use of barley straw and a rubbing post.





Left, another good uniform litter and, right, most of the 17 piglets in one litter!

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€120 per tonne and the barley grain only fetches €130 per tonne!

Needless to say, this makes bedding expensive yet the consumer is still looking for the best and the cheapest pork and, nowadays, that means welfare friendly pork. In the loose housing the pens are cleaned weekly and new straw is added twice weekly.

The farrowing house has four sections, each with 44 places, and these have a special section of 'solid' floor where the sow

lays to protect her nipples – with such fecundity it is very important to ensure no suckling potential is lost!

On this farm gilts are averaging 10.4 piglets weaned and the gilts are retaining their condition (15mm backfat).

To date there are no sow figures as this is a new farm that is currently being stocked with gilts. In fact, the first batch of gilts through the farm had a very impressive farrowing rate of 88%.

One of the benefits that is already being seen with the loose housing is a really signifi-

cant reduction in the number of piglets born dead.

The sows also farrow much more easily and this is put down to better uterine and abdominal wall muscle tone because of exercise. This, in turn, is reflected in less animals requiring assistance at farrowing.

As a group, the performance figures are impressive. Total born figures are averaging 14.2 and the born alive figure is at a very impressive 13.4.

In fact, as we went round the farrowing house we found one gilt with 17 live piglets



On the fattening farm – again uniformity is a key attribute of the ACMC stock.

and there were no obvious runts among them. At present the number of pigs weaned per sow per year is just over 24 and piglets are being weaned at 7.5kg.

Weaning is at 28 days. Pre-weaning mortality is under 10% and it was just 9.2% for the last batch to go through before our visit. The post weaning figure is a very good 1.2%.

As a consequence of high piglet numbers any gilts or sows that are not going to be bred from again are kept lactating and are sent to the 'joker' room where they suckle those piglets whose own mothers can not cope.

Benefits of downtime

At the end of each batch of farrowing the farrowing room is thoroughly cleaned and disinfected and left empty for a week.

This new breeder farm was the first in the region to be designed to meet the requirements of the new EU welfare rules.

Before its construction there were a lot of concerns about these, but this farm has shown that by combining a correctly designed facility with the placidity of ACMC

genetics these new regulations should not be a cause for concern.

We then went on to see ACMC genetics on a typical Spanish fattening farm.

Typically, pigs come on to the farm at 20kg and are taken through to 110-120kg. Here again the farmer had good things to say about the ACMC genetics. In particular, he cited the uniformity of incoming animals and their calm, placid temperament.

Marcial Chico's involvement does not stop at the farm gate as they now run the local pig abattoir and processing plant and this takes some 40% of the product that has its origins on their breeding farms.

Today, some 80% of this output is sold as fresh pork or sausages and cured hams. The remaining 20% is converted into the company's own brands of dried sausage, such as the local spicy version known as chorizo.

At the abattoir the message was again favourable for the ACMC pigs. Key attributes according to the plant's management were uniformity, conformation and a consistent backfat of 12-14mm.

A real plus was that the meat was just a little bit darker than that of other modern hybrids and this is a real bonus as the local

market has a preference for this slightly darker meat.

So, if we bring the various aspects of our visit together what can we conclude?

Firstly, the driving force that once created NPD has done something unique in the pig world – it has created another breeding company that should be just as successful as the previous one.

A winner at all levels

Secondly, the ACMC product is a winner at all levels, be it on the breeding or fattening farms or in the abattoir. At breeding level fecundity is linked to uniformity and livability. At the commercial level the theme of uniformity continues, but here it is strongly linked to carcass quality and low cost of production.

When we get to the abattoir again uniformity is to the fore and here it is linked to carcass and meat quality.

It is still early days, but all the signs are that when it comes to pig breeding ACMC is here to stay and the name of Curtis is firmly back at the top. ■

Uniformity and quality is easy to see in the abattoir.

