

BEAUTIFUL BEAST

Driving from Sienna to Florence several years ago, a small hand-painted sign reading “ristorante” caught my eye, and I made a detour. Veering off the road with no idea where I was going, I followed several equally inconspicuous signs which eventually led me down a dirt road to the small village of Lornano in the Chianti region of Tuscany. My friend and I were on the last leg of our journey before returning home to Australia. We were on a mission to find bistecca alla fiorentina, the steak for which the region is known. Not just any steak, it is traditionally a primal cut, served on the bone, of the regal Chianina cow, a breed developed in Tuscany from animals brought to Italy from Asia and Africa. As the names suggest, Chianti is Chianina country.

One of the world’s oldest and largest purebred cattle breeds, the milk-white Chianina is a beautiful and stately bovine, blessed with long, lean legs, a fringe of thick, dark lashes around its eyes and broad shoulders with a draping muscular neckline that is one of the cow’s defining features. I had seen, but not tasted, an aged side of Chianina hanging at a stall at the Slow Food Salone del Gusto in Torino a week earlier. The beast was indeed unusually good looking, but was its beauty skin only deep?

In Lornano, we made a beeline for the Osteria La Bottega di Lornano, the only restaurant in town and the destination promised by the small sign on the autoroute. We promptly ordered a bistecca, along with a second main of a wild boar stew, two entrées and a salad. We were hungry. The entrées arrived, followed by the stew. Moments later, the bistecca was presented to us by the waiter with a curt “un kilo.” This was fairly self-evident from the size of the enormous steak before us. The bone hung off the plate at two ends. We immediately regretted ordering so greedily.

I am accustomed to a steak bleeding as it is cut open, but this one did not. Seared on the outside over a bed of hot coals, the interior was evenly rare to the edges. The knife slipped through the meat like butter. As I began to chew, the flesh was incredibly soft without being flabby, a buttery and velvety texture that released its juices in the mouth rather than on the plate. To the chef’s credit, this meat was perfectly cooked. Its flavour suggested an animal that had been pasture fed, well reared and properly aged. The wild boar stew, sadly pushed aside as we re-assessed our priorities, could simply not compete with its perfection.

Chianina were brought into Australia in the seventies. The breed grows well, calves easily and is exceptionally large and hardy in difficult conditions. I was delighted to find out two years ago that Daniela Mollica and Sam Walker from Melbourne were planning to breed Chianina cattle in Australia, the first to do so specifically for their meat. Chianina have generally been reared by Australian cattle farmers for crossing with and improving the genetic and commercial qualities of other breeds, producing the Chiangus for example. Daniela is not surprised that the Chianina aren’t raised for food in Australia. As she says, “the average beef farmer isn’t travelling to Italy annually, so they look at breeds from a hybrid vigour perspective, not a finished taste on a plate.” The cows are big and beautiful, but they are also a particularly intelligent breed of cattle—sometimes inclined to jump fences—explains Daniela, making them a tricky herd to manage. She attributes her cows’ reasonably good behaviour to Sam’s incredibly calm demeanour.

Daniela and Sam's cows are exclusively grass fed and spend their short lives gazing over Bass Strait on Cape Liptrap in South Gippsland. The animals are slaughtered at an average of 24-26 months and aged for two weeks which is critical to developing full flavour in the meat. This, and giving their animals the best possible life, is something Daniela and Sam are deeply committed to. They are part of growing movement of gastronomic farmers in Australia who are driven by taste and a deep respect for their animals and the land.

Two years is a long wait for a steak. When I recently received my first delivery, ten kilos in a variety of cuts, I tore open the box like a kid on Christmas morning. Amongst the different cuts, there was my very own 500-gram Chianina porterhouse—not a full kilo, but more than enough. Busting with perhaps too much enthusiasm, I whipped out the skillet and cranked up the flame. I rubbed the steak with a little garlic and seasoned it with salt and pepper. In my excitement, I forgot to oil it.

Cooking the perfect steak is a delicate operation, requiring complete confidence in one's abilities. The pan should be searing hot, the meat nicely oiled and seasoned. After cooking, the steak should be covered and rested on a slightly warm plate for five to ten minutes, depending on the thickness, so the juices can settle back into the meat. The rest is up to intuition, preference and practice. At cooking school in France, the chefs taught us to use our hand to test how well the meat was cooked. Holding your hand in a loose fist, the soft, fleshy bit closest to the V at the base of the thumb and forefinger feels like rare meat when you press it. The further you move away from your thumb and the firmer the flesh, the greater the degree of cooking. It's fairly straightforward, and it works. The important thing is to trust yourself, and remain level-headed.

Naturally, in my excitement, I threw all this out the window. I was conscious of Daniela's warning not to overcook it. The Chianina doesn't have much cover fat so the barbeque cuts are best cooked rare to medium-rare, or even raw as a Carpaccio, seasoned with a drizzle of good olive oil and a squeeze of lemon. The meat sizzled energetically as it hit the heat. I stood watching anxiously for what felt like minutes. I was convinced I was overcooking it. Losing my cool entirely, I proceeded to tear the steak off the skillet, leaving behind bits of meat. Disaster. I did the same thing with the other side. By now, I was beyond all hope. There was no doubt in my mind that I had ruined this beautiful steak for which I had waited two years to eat.

I topped my steak with a small handful of arugula, drizzled with lemon juice and a little olive oil, and sat down to eat with shame. I made the first cut, expecting it to be the dull grey of a well-done steak. It was almost raw. How could I have misjudged so badly? I was now worried it was too rare and would be chewy. Instead, the knife slipped easily through the blue-red interior of the meat. There were very few juices running on my plate, just like my bistecca in Lornano. Sure enough, when I took my first bite, I was transported back to Lornano, back to the enormous, unforgettable steak with the texture of beefy butter. I had committed several atrocities against this steak. This was, by far, not my finest work in the kitchen. I realised that the skill of the chef is clearly not what gives this meat its exceptional qualities. The breed itself is truly something special, beautiful inside and out.

Along with the glorious bistecca alla fiorentina, another traditional Tuscan treatment of the Chianina involves slow braising a secondary cut in beef stock and red wine. This comforting winter dish brings together some of my favourite Tuscan flavours—sage, porcini

mushrooms, cavolo nero and, of course, Chianina beef. The vegetables and sauce can also be served with pasta as the primi piatti and the meat with a salad as the secondi piatti. The sage, kale, artichokes can easily be substituted for thyme, French savoury, carrots, leeks, celery, olives, tomato or whatever is in season for a more Provençale-style dish.

Tuscan-style braised beef

Ingredients

1 kg beef (rump is good, but so are the secondary cuts)	400 grams chopped tomatoes (use jarred or tinned, if out of season)
Half a bunch of cavalo nero(Tuscan kale)	Olive oil
4 young artichokes	5-6 sage leaves
2 small onions, finely chopped	2 bay leaves
1 cup of dry red wine	3-4 garlic cloves
500 ml beef stock	Small handful of chopped parsley
	Salt and pepper

Method

Cut a few holes in the meat or under its fat, and stuff with sage leaves and small chunks of garlic. Tie the meat loosely with cooking string, and season well. Heat the oil over medium-high heat in a heavy casserole dish. Brown the meat, and set aside. Sauté the onions, seasoned with salt and pepper. Return beef to pot, and add wine. When the wine has evaporated by half, add the tomatoes, bay leaves and a quarter of the stock. Cover partially, and simmer at 175°C for 2 ½ to 3 hours until very tender. Turn the meat occasionally, gradually adding the remaining stock to ensure the meat doesn't dry out. Reserve 200ml of stock for the last 30 minutes.

While the meat is simmering, prepare the artichokes by removing the outer leaves until you arrive at the tender yellow leaves. Chop off the tops, trim stalks, remove the choke and quarter. Soak in acidulated water to prevent any browning. Remove the tough stalks from the washed kale, and roughly chop the leaves. Add the kale and artichokes to the pot, and cover with the remaining 200ml of stock. Cook gently with lid on for the last 30 minutes. Finish with the chopped parsley. Enjoy with a Chianti, or venture further away from Tuscany with an Australian wine such as Penfolds St Henri Shiraz or Bin 389.

Variation: Add 10 grams of dried porcini mushroom, or 3 fresh wild mushrooms if available, to give the stew a layer of earthy complexity. The meat can also be wrapped in pancetta (tied on with cooking string) for extra depth and richness.

For more information on where to source Chianina beef in Melbourne, visit chianina.com.au.