

A WHOLE NEW CATTLE CLASS

The Italian breed Chianina offers nose-to-tail eating at its best, writes Richard Cornish.

GUY Grossi is in his city kitchen. In front of him is a whole steer, 280 kilograms of boned and bagged meat that when alive weighs more than half a tonne. "Steak, osso buco, rump, chuck, mince, T-bones. Great!" Grossi says. He has taken a risk and bought the beef from a Gippsland farmer without even tasting a single gram. But this was no ordinary steer. It was a Chianina, a sleek, almost pure white, beast that stood nearly 180 centimetres high at the shoulder. It came from an ancient line of Italian cattle that is the source of perhaps the most famous beef dish in the world.

Chianina is a breed of cattle from Italy that was introduced to Australia in the 1970s. They arrived on the Italian Peninsula from India during the Bronze Age. (Their elongated faces and pronounced back hump are reminders of their Asian roots, features associated with Indian Brahman cattle.) They are a stunning-looking beast with long, slender legs and a lean torso covered with a brilliant shiny white coat under which the muscles of the shoulder and rump ripple with every step. Used by the Romans as draught cattle and as sacrificial animals, the Chianina survived as a breed in the *Val di Chiana* in Tuscany. In this region of Italy, their flesh is grilled to make the celebrated dish *bistecca alla Fiorentina*.

It was this Florentine beef dish, a massive steak on the bone grilled over charcoal, that drew Grossi's farmers, Sam Walker and Daniela Mollica, to breed Chianina. On their undulating coastal property just east of Venus Bay, they drive quietly past their herd in a white Land Rover. Their herd sits peacefully in the swale of the dunes. Their bull, cheekily named Barry White, sits to one side of the cows and calves.

Mollica first came across Chianina when she lived in Italy, dividing her time between working for Slow Food, practising as a chiropractor and cycling on the pro circuit for the Italian women's team. "It was 1996 and I was dining at a trattoria called *Il Pozzo in Monteriggioni* — a small hilltop town in the province of Siena — with legendary *Brunello di Montalcino* winemaker Gianfranco Soldera," she says. "It was an extraordinary meal, a beautiful, lightly charred steak, served sliced and seasoned with salt, olive oil and a squeeze of lemon, which we all shared with his *Casa Basse Soldera Brunello di Montalcino*." She recalls that the wine, made with sangiovese grapes, married magnificently with the beef. "Both the beef and the wine come from the same landscape — it was an inspiration," she says.

Traditionally, *bistecca alla Fiorentina* comes from an older, larger beast, one that has spent a lifetime working the fields. The result is a rib-eye steak almost the size of a laptop computer and weighing about the same.

Mollica's husband, Sam Walker, drives on to show us a newborn calf. Still finding its feet, the young bull was born fawn like a young deer. Like all Chianina, he will change to white as he matures. Even at a few hours old, his body has distinctive muscle flexing under the skin. Walker explains that a boutique beef product relies on small herds that are tended carefully.

"We are raising amazing-quality beef using a network of like-minded farmers connected with a small, but discerning, client base of professionals [chefs] and food lovers who are not just prepared to take the primals [eye fillet, scotch and porterhouse] but will buy and know how to cook all parts of the beast."

Walker and Mollica are selling 10-kilogram boxes of Chianina beef to the public, labelled as Isola Chianina, which contain a mix of cuts. Mollica says: "This is nose-to-tail eating. Without it, this project couldn't work."

Back in his kitchen, Grossi takes a knife and cuts open a bag of porterhouse steaks. His easy demeanour and constant repartee give way to concerned silence. The meat is dark. Quite deep red. There is little sign of the white streaks and flecks that make up the lacework of intramuscular fat — the stuff that keeps steaks moist when you cook them. He grimaces when he holds up a steak — it has not been cut evenly. He could never sell it in his restaurant — one part would be rare and the other well done.

"Look at an Italian butcher's cutting chart and there are 360 different cuts," he laments. "It looks like a road map. In Australia, there's just a few dozen."

With a few deft movements of a boning knife and a little hammering of the eye fillet, he has a plate of carpaccio crudo. We taste it. There is a pause. Grossi begins to nod. His frown changes to a smile. "This is good," he declares.

His chef, Chris Rodriguez, plates up a porterhouse he seasoned simply then pan-fried. This steak is even better. "I was worried that because it didn't have the marbling, it wasn't going to be juicy," Grossi says. "But this is so juicy." It is lean and clean-finishing. The texture is tender without going to mush. It is truly stunning beef. Grossi is relieved.

Front-of-house manager Cosimo Tedesco enters the kitchen and samples the beef. His eyes close and he just smiles. "Definitely Barolo," he says, declaring his wine preference, "or a super Tuscan."

Grossi gathers up his chefs and hands out the orders. Bolognese sauce for the mince, osso buco to be cooked down for osso buco Milanese. The rump to be slow-cooked sous vide. Soon the great pile of beef has disappeared into workstations around the kitchen.

"It needs a little more dry ageing to get the flavour right," he says. "But this is bloody beautiful."

A 10-kilogram box of Isola Chianina costs \$175 delivered. Email daniela@chianina.com.au.

Isola Chianina is on the menu at Grossi Florentino, 80 Bourke Street, Melbourne. Chianina and Chianti is a special meal at Grossi Florentino on March 17 from 7.30pm. Cost is \$180. To book, phone 96621811 or see www.grossi.com.au.