

WHITE KNIGHTS

One of the world's oldest breeds of cattle is right at home on South Gippsland's rugged coast. Gemma Gadd reports.

Roaming the coastal dunes of Cape Liptrap, looking out to Bass Strait, is a herd of Italian Chianina cattle.

Despite being one of the oldest cattle breeds in the world, the Chianina — pronounced kee-a-nee-na — is still relatively new to Australia. The first of these snowy-white cattle were farmed here in the 1970s and arrived on the South Gippsland coast just four years ago. However, the breed is certainly making its mark on one dedicated couple, who have become one of just nine registered breeders in Australia.

Daniela Mollica and her husband, Sam Walker, produce grass-fed, chemical free, dry-aged beef, which they sell to restaurants and through a home delivery service, meeting a growing market for fresh, local, ethically produced food.

Sam is a fourth-generation farmer with a background in agricultural science and experience on his family's farms at Broken Hill in NSW and Birdsville in South Australia. Daniela is one of the founders of Melbourne's Slow Food movement, which runs its own farmers' market in Collingwood.

The couple live and work in Melbourne where they raise their two children, Gianni, 2, and newborn Francesca. Daniela works as a chiropractor. They also run luxury holiday accommodation at Walkerville, near their farm.

It's a hectic schedule, but Sam spends time every week at the farm — a 50-hectare coastal property between Tarwin Lower and Walkerville — where each management decision is made with future generations in mind. They use coal and lime rather than synthetic fertilisers to improve their soils and encourage native species to flourish among the improved pastures.

The Chianina remains a little-known breed in Australia. The Italian breed is distinguished by its leggy frame, snowy-white coat and tasty beef and is believed to have originated from cattle brought from Asia and Africa to Italy in about 1500BC. Developed to pull ploughs and as a source of food during the Roman Empire, the Chianina is one of the older, if not the oldest, purebred cattle breeds in the world.

Slow to mature, Chianina cattle are not suitable for large-scale commercial beef production, but with their heat tolerance, are ideal for crossbreeding in Australian conditions.

A feature in traditional Roman parades, the Chianina is generally docile, although it requires careful management. Taller than your average breed, these cattle can easily clear a fence if spooked.

"We call them hurdlers," Sam says.

"They are a lot smarter than an average European-blood cow," Daniela says. "You've got to handle them differently."

When it came time to select a breed of cattle to farm, Sam left the decision to Daniela in the hope that her involvement from the start would encourage her to feel part of the farm and Sam would get to spend more time in the country with his city-raised wife.

"I thought if Daniela chose the breed, she might come to the farm more often," Sam says.

The choice was an easy one for Daniela, who was raised in Melbourne, but lived in Tuscany for four years before the pair met. It was there she discovered Tuscany's famous dish, La Bistecca Fiorentina — a heavily salted, chargrilled, rare-cooked Chianina steak.

"The Florentines consider it one of the highest expressions of Tuscan gastronomical achievement," Daniela says.

So when the opportunity arose to buy Chianina and Chiangus (a cross of Chianina and Angus cattle) cows from a sale at Yea, they didn't hesitate.

They now run 50 pure Chianina and Chiangus cows and are one of just nine registered breeders in Australia. A further 50 cows are run by a contract farmer nearby and all the resulting calves are sold under their Isola brand.

And Daniela, a regular on Melbourne's Lygon St, where her family runs renowned Melbourne eateries, happily makes the two-and-a-half hour drive to the farm as often as she can.

A gold medal winner in this year's ABC *delicious* magazine produce awards, Isola Chianina beef is appearing everywhere from family dinner tables to Melbourne's finest restaurants, including Grossi Fiorentino.

Open a box of Isola Chianina beef and inside the contents tell a story — there's T-bone, rump, rib eye on the bone, porterhouse, something to roast, some schnitzel, diced beef, lean mince, Osso Buco and short ribs — every part of the animal.

"Everything is sold," Daniela says. "We wait until we have enough orders to process an animal. It's about respecting the whole carcass."

For Sam and Daniela's brand, the animals are processed at a minimum of two years of age, when they weigh 500 to 600 kilograms, and yield about 56 per cent of their body weight in red meat.

The couple pack the meat into 32 10kg packs and each pack is sold for \$175 (\$17.50 a kilogram), delivered fresh. Daniela says it's the fresh delivery that helps set their business apart.

"We actually have two key points of difference," she says. "The breed - we have a lot of customers wanting the traditional Italian breed for customary recipes - and the fact we deliver fresh, not frozen."

The animals leave the farm two at a time (cattle are social creatures and don't like to be separated from the herd) to be killed at Radford's abattoir in Warragul. The carcasses are then graded, using the Meat Standards Australia system, and sent to a butcher at Koo-wee-rup where they are hung for at least two weeks to enrich the beef's natural flavour. Finally, they are butchered to Daniela's exacting specifications.

"Even just teaching the butcher we wanted the T-bones thicker, the rib eye on the bone — all the traditional Italian cuts people are wanting — took some time," she says.

"There's no back-tracking, there are minimal food miles, it's as direct as possible from the farm to the customer. We use all small, family-operated businesses and when we get inquiry from areas outside Melbourne or Victoria for home-delivered meat, we tell them to find a local farmer."

They average two carcasses each fortnight but aim to double production.

An increasing consumer awareness of how animals farmed for meat are treated is another driving force behind the popularity of the product.

"We get a lot of feedback from customers saying it's a pleasure to eat meat raised with care and respect," Daniela says.

So far, they have resisted the temptation to allow a larger company to take their product, break it up into portions and sell it.

“We have 12 restaurants all waiting for portions,” Sam says. “we work on the basis that they take the whole carcass or nothing at all. At the moment, we are too small to break the animal up.

“The longer you can control the product, the more money you can make, and that’s what we do; we take it right through to the customer.”

And if \$17.50 a kilogram sounds expensive, consider that a 1kg Chianina T-bone sells for \$180 in an Italian restaurant in Sydney and for \$120 at Grossi Fiorentino.

A self-confessed foodie, Daniela is relieved to see chefs seeking flavour over texture.

“Tender should not be the only adjective used when describing meat,” she says. “We’re just not convinced that all meat should be able to be cut up with a spoon.”

Initially, Sam and Daniela intended to raise their own breeding stock but have since decided to put all the calves towards the beef brand and buy replacement heifers or breed them on contract farms using artificial insemination. But, with a handful of Chianina studs in Australia, this is proving a challenge.

To overcome this, they have invested in two pure Chianina bulls to use over their Chiangus cows. Now they find themselves fielding inquiries for genetics from overseas, as many countries are unable to import Chianina cattle or genetics from Italy. They are considering embryo transfer work to fulfil this demand and provide another means of growing their herd.

While providing the basis for a blossoming business and alternative cash flow, the farm is also a lifestyle choice — a place to spend time with family, grow good, healthy food (lamb initially) and teach their children about caring for the land and animals.

Sam describes their rolling coastal hills as sandy, lean country not ideal for running cows and calves year-round. But, with some better, higher country at the northern end of their property, away from the coast, it is possible.

“The dunes are good in winter,” he says. “It’s milder, there aren’t any frosts and the grass can keep growing.

“I knew this country produced great meat when we started killing our own lambs — the meat was great and I was thinking we should be selling lamb. Finally, we were ready to turn off beef and the results speak for themselves.”

“It has been a big investment — we didn’t sell anything for the first four years.”

Although the Chiangus cattle roaming Sam and Daniela’s farm are dark, they are all at least 50 per cent Chianina blood and range in colour from snow-white to fawn, dark brown and black.

“In Italy, they feed pure Chianina cattle grain to get the fat cover,” Sam says. “We’re just going with grass, so we like a very small amount of Angus to increase the fat over the muscle. We’re about the product, we’re not breed purists.”

In a time when food miles are getting longer and the consumer is distanced from those who care for the animals that grace dinner tables daily, Sam and Daniela believe local is best — and their clients agree. Daniela says about 50 per cent of their home-delivered packs go to repeat customers.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s not our brand, but we do urge people to buy fresh product, direct from their local farmer.”