

ETHICAL BEEF EATERS MOVE AGAINST THE HERD

FOR a new breed of city-living carnivores, a great steak at a good price is no longer enough.

This small but growing band of urban consumers is demanding "ethically produced" meat to soothe their conscience, particularly from cattle that have roamed free on green pastures, are hormone-free and killed at a small local abattoir without huge scenes of panicked cattle.

Charging \$175 for a 10kg pack of mixed cuts, Isola Farm in South Gippsland, Victoria, is part of the burgeoning industry providing just that.

"The more people that do this, the more we have a viable alternative to the supermarket meat that is being forced upon people because local butchers close down," said co-owner Daniela Mollica, who runs the small farm with her partner, Sam Walker.

They won't slaughter one of their prized Chianina herd -- the marble white species from which the signature Tuscan bistecca alla fiorentina comes -- until there have been enough orders from the public and restaurant industry to warrant the kill.

Consumers aren't allowed to take only the best cuts, with a 10kg home packs of meat containing prime and secondary cuts.

"An animal has given its life for this so we're not just going to cherrypick the best bits of meat," Ms Mollica said. "We want everyone to respect the entire animal."

"Respect" is also the watchword for the small local abattoir they use, where animals are stunned before being shot. Isola Farm also tries to keep the food miles down, politely knocking back interstate inquiries and suggesting people look for similar product closer to home.

Slow Food Australia chairman Geoff Hudson said consumers were increasingly worried about where their food came from, but a mass market for ethical food was a long way off.

"People in general are concerned about what happens to the animal before they see it nicely wrapped in gladwrap on the supermarket shelf, but it's always going to be more expensive than stuff that is grown on a massive production line."

Simon Philp used to stack that meat on the supermarket shelf, running an IGA at Fairlight on Sydney's northern beaches.

A suggestion that his son's meningitis could be linked to diet helped push the family to NSW's southern highlands, where he now runs grass-fed hormone-free black angus.

"Five years ago I had never seen grass-fed beef in Sydney," he said.

"Our 15 or 20 cattle are on a truck for 40 minutes to the local abattoir, instead of 150 cattle travelling 10 hours.

"They get off the truck, sit in a paddock for a day or so before they get slaughtered. The lower stress level must make a difference."

Pia Akerman