

A woman with short dark hair, smiling, wearing a dark brown jacket over a patterned scarf. She is standing in a grassy field with a blurred background of trees and a cloudy sky.

# DANIELA MOLLICA

A pioneer of the Slow Food movement in Australia, Daniela is taking her passion and respect for locally grown produce one step further in Victoria by breeding Italian cattle on her South Gippsland farm.



SHARING THE SEASON'S FIRST RIPE FIGS WITH HER FAMILY – PICKED FROM A BIG OLD TREE  
SHE'D LOVINGLY BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE AFTER SETTLING IN ON HER FARM – TAKES DANIELA  
MOLLIKA'S FOOD MEMORIES FULL CIRCLE TO HER ITALIAN GRANDFATHER WHO IGNITED  
HER LOVE OF GOOD HOMEGROWN PRODUCE AS A CHILD.

Daniela is best known for starting Slow Food Melbourne in 1996 – a movement and philosophy that focuses on respecting how food is produced by local growers from the land to the plate. As a result of her involvement with Slow Food, she decided to raise Chianina cattle – a beautiful, marbled white bovine that is one of the world's oldest breeds – with her husband Sam Walker on their property in South Gippsland, Victoria.

But the origins of her love of food, and particularly her passion for understanding its provenance, date back to her grandfather's veggie patch in suburban Melbourne.

"My grandfather was a typical Italian migrant," Daniela says. "He had a tiny little house, and the rest of his block, together with another block he subsequently purchased, was filled with fruits and vegetables. He fed our entire extended family."

Daniela's grandfather didn't speak English and as a child, she had yet to learn any Italian – that would come later, when she spent four years living in Tuscany studying, working and cycling through the countryside.

"We couldn't communicate directly, but I would follow him around the garden every Sunday as he tended the vegetables. That's how we connected," Daniela recalls. "Out of all of the children and grandchildren, his first fig of the season was always saved for me. It's such a lovely food memory for me that sharing my first figs with my husband and son Gianni is truly joyous."

Like so many Italian families, Daniela's was drawn together by what was put on the table. "Everything we did revolved around food. It was all about food, family and feeding people," she says.

Daniela worked in her family's Melbourne restaurant, Il Gambero on the Park on Lygon Street, from the time she was old enough to reach the coffee machine by standing on a box. As a child, she wanted to be a chef herself, but was steered away from the hospitality industry by her parents – who felt she should go to university – and by the restaurant's head chef who sternly told her that, "as a chef, you have to work while everyone else is playing".



However, Daniela's passion for food persisted and became fused with a social conscience: she was concerned about where produce came from and how the land it was grown on was treated.

"When my then-partner James Broadway was approached in Italy about starting a Slow Food *convivium* [local group] in Melbourne, I knew it was something I was very philosophically aligned with," recalls Daniela.

The pair began the chapter – one of Australia's first and for a long time, the largest outside Italy – by approaching other key industry figures they believed would be passionate about the same principles, including cook and author Stephanie Alexander, the late Melbourne restaurateur Donlevy Fitzpatrick and wine producers Rosa and Colin Mitchell.

"It wasn't a huge mental leap for these people. They were doing Slow Food things anyway; they just didn't have a name for it," says Daniela.

These 'things' form the core principles of the Slow Food movement, of respecting regionality and seasonality, and resisting the loss of diversity that has occurred with the industrialisation and globalisation of food production. It is also about preserving old traditions and celebrating the connections and community that can be built around good food. Today, the movement's motto: 'Good, Clean and Fair', is used to encapsulate its guiding principles.

"These days, every second person's marketing spin is about being seasonal and local," says Daniela. "But just 15 years ago that wasn't where food was at – it was all about buying fancy ingredients from Spain and drinking French champagne. In a way, it's a great testament to how successful the Slow Food message has been here."

Among Slow Food Australia's many accomplishments, Daniela is particularly proud of its part in supporting and promoting Stephanie Alexander's Kitchen Garden Foundation (as Stephanie was one of the founding members of Slow Food Melbourne) and the flourishing of farmers' markets nationwide. »



"If we don't try and protect small, local producers, and give people an alternative to the supermarket duopoly, then we're in danger of losing them," says Daniela.

Today, in addition to Daniela and Sam's city jobs as a chiropractor and a marketing manager respectively, the couple run Isola Farm, which they bought five years ago and where they raise their cattle.

The ethos of Slow Food underpins all the decisions they make on the farm, from their choice of cattle, to how they tend their land, as well as to how their animals are fed, reared, slaughtered, butchered and distributed.

"The first important thing is the way we take care of our land," says Daniela. "With anything – be it the production of vegetables or meat – it fundamentally comes back to the soil. We're not certified organic, but we don't use synthetic chemicals. And, rather than stripping all the trees so we can produce as many cattle as possible, we're doing a native replanting project with banksias. Not only is this good for the land, but it also provides a nicer environment for our animals."

Daniela and Sam also pride themselves on their 'respectful' farming practices. Their cattle are free-range, grass-fed and killed at a local abattoir before the meat is sent to the local butcher.

'Food miles' are also considered in terms of how and where they distribute their produce. As a result, 10kg home packs of mixed cuts of their beef are available for delivery in Melbourne only. "What I won't do is send a 10-kilo pack of meat to Perth. Although people do ask, and even offer to pay extra, it's not about the cost," Daniela explains. "I tell them they should be looking for someone in their local area who's doing great things – looking after their land and treating their animals lovingly."

Daniela believes that as much as there's often a 'disconnect' between city-dwelling consumers and the rural properties producing some of their specialised or gourmet fare, the gulf of misunderstanding can go both ways. "A lot of farmers are not really in tune with what people in the city want," she says.

In their case, the combination of Sam's farming background and Daniela's knowledge of urban-dwelling gourmands, through her connection with the Slow Food movement, helped them with their decision to breed cattle, as well as the breed of cattle they raised.

If Sam had looked into the breed and found they were not suitable

for our area, we wouldn't have done it," Daniela says. "We looked at it from a taste perspective, but also from a farming and breeding perspective. A lot of the people buying our products have been overseas and have been exposed to Chianina. We've chosen something a bit interesting and different, and not widely available."

Nonetheless, this makes the animals less commercially viable – Chianinas take up to two years to develop their flavour fully – while the better known Angus cattle can be slaughtered after 12 months.

The Chianina breed is renowned for its association with the

famous Italian dish *la bistecca alla Fiorentina*, which is traditionally made from the T-bone steak of Chianina or Maremmana cattle. However, its secondary cuts also have an amazing depth of flavour.

"If I could breed an animal that just made T-bones, I'd be a very wealthy woman," she says. "But we slaughter the whole animal and you have to respect that, so I'm trying to educate people about the other cuts."

"Every pack has the same number of primary and secondary cuts. At first, people would say, 'What the hell do I do with the ribs?', so I started sending out recipes. Now they're disappointed if they don't get the ribs."

The couple straddles the city-country lifestyle, living and working in Melbourne and managing their farm, where they have 80-100 breeders. This enables them to sell just one to two cattle a week, meaning that they're a very small artisan farm. "Our goal at the moment is not to get bigger," Daniela says. "Our business plan is about producing an animal with flavour, it's not about growth."

Sam has started looking into an artificial insemination program involving Chianina cattle as it is a rare breed. Daniela, meanwhile, is looking at ways they can diversify by producing other beef products, such as *bresaola* – an air-dried salted beef.

"Everyone makes choices about what they want to put in their mouth. Ours is, in some ways, a hedonistic choice based on the flavour of a beautiful dish, but we also really respect the animals, treat them well and use the whole animal," explains Daniela. "I like to say that our cattle have a great life, except for one day."

*Isola Farm Chianina home packs can be purchased for delivery in Melbourne only (\$175 for a 10kg carton of mixed cuts) and various cuts are also available in Sydney through suppliers Pino's Dolce Vita Fine Foods in Kogarah, and Feather and Bone in Rozelle. For more information, visit [chianina.com.au](http://chianina.com.au).*



Daniela with son Gianni

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