

## BACKS, BIKES, BEARS AND COWS

AS A teenager, Daniela Mollica worked in her father's restaurant Il Gambero (Lygon Street) making coffees, but she dreamed of becoming a chef. She never realised that dream; instead, she became a chiropractor, then a professional cyclist, a founder of Slow Food Victoria and then — at the ripe old age of 34 — she turned to farming. Mollica and husband Sam Walker bought their land at Cape Liptrap in South Gippsland six years ago. They are, as far as they are aware, the only Australian farmers to breed slow-growing Italian Chianina beef cattle (pronounced key-a-knee-na) for the table and their product is beloved of some chefs. Mollica handles the gastronomic side of their business, Isola Chianina.

### **Career turning point? One of them at least?**

When I was 16, a chef at Il Gambero took me aside and said: "Don't be a chef. You've always got to work when everyone else is playing." He wasn't being sexist; he was just saying that that had been his life. I'm 40 now. This is 24 years ago. Being a chef wasn't glorious then, like perhaps it is now.

### **Why Chianina beef?**

My father was born in Italy and my mother's family were from Stromboli. In 1999, I received a scholarship and studied Italian in Florence, because we had never spoken it growing up. I worked as a chiropractor in Lucca and then I got picked up by an Italian cycling team and so I raced for two years. That's how I got to know Tuscany, basically training on the roads there. I first ate (Chianina) beef in restaurants there. It made a big impression on me. It was the taste. It has an amazing flavour. Beef had never struck me in this way. I'd never eaten a steak and thought: "That was fantastic."

### **How did you go from being a chiropractor to farming beef?**

My husband's family has cattle and sheep stations in South Australia and Broken Hill. He expressed an interest in buying a farm and I was keen on the idea. When I discovered that Chianina were already in Australia, I was excited. They were brought here in the 1970s but farmers here have used them for cross-breeding and not for the plate. Now, we're lucky because there's an understanding different breeds have different characteristics.

### **First food memory?**

I remember going to my nonno (grandfather) in Pascoe Vale — he used to save me the first fig of the season. I loved them so much.

### **Favourite 10-minute meal?**

Probably a plate of pasta, tomatoes out of the garden and a little olive oil. Crush up fresh tomatoes in the pan. And you know what we do when the pasta is almost cooked? You throw some green beans in and they just cook with the pasta in the last few minutes. Beautiful.

### **Guilty food pleasure?**

Haribo gummi bears.

### **You chaperoned Italian butcher and restaurateur Dario Cecchini at the food and wine festival last week. What's your connection with him?**

I had met Dario many years ago, but then last year, I spent a week observing his whole operation in Panzano, outside Florence. I spent some time with his butchering team, some time with him in the shop, in the kitchen with his cooks and eating at his three restaurants. We found that we shared a philosophy. In his words: "Animals need to be reared with respect, good food [grass only with our beasts] and space to move freely and a humane kill." He said many times during his visit here that "before sustainability comes responsibility". He defines this as being respectful — and consuming the whole beast.

### **Can you sum up your shared views?**

To have good-tasting beef you have to treat the animal correctly — and as Cecchini says, you can smell a well-treated animal in its carcass. It's not just about eye fillet steak or, in the case of the Chianina, it's not only about the bistecca alla fiorentina (the prized T-bone). This is a pyramidal way of looking at the animal. Instead, we need to give regard to the whole animal such that consuming meat becomes a "circle".

### **The best way to eat a steak?**

If we are cooking a steak, we always bring it to room temperature, rub on some salt and then cook it to rare over red-hot coals at the front of our pizza oven. It's important to let it rest and then we serve it with olive oil and share it with friends. Sam's favourite steak is a Chianina rump steak, cut two or three fingers thick and cooked rare. The rump is a working muscle so it's not mega-tender but in his words, "a little bit of chew brings out a lot of flavour".

### **Who butchers your cattle?**

Jerome Hoban from GameKeepers in Cardinia. He's a trained chef and understands quality meat.

### **Where can readers try it?**

All over. Current customers include: Cicciolina, Beatrix Bakes, Sosta Cucina, Libertine, Woolshed Pub, Collins Quarter, Grossi Fiorentino.

*Also sold direct to the public, see [chianina.com.au](http://chianina.com.au).*