

Focus on

# Riverslea

*The Best Beef*



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# A decade of endeavour

Alan and Sonia Martin have many years of experience on the land and love their work, believing very firmly in what they do. They are keen to adapt farming practices which are sustainable and make most effective use of new technology and scientific information. They are practical people with very much a hands on approach to their business and a deep involvement in the local and broader farming community.

## Early apprenticeship

Alan has worked on the land since 1985 when fires decimated his family's properties at Adelaide Lead and Moore's Flat in central Victoria. Alan never really returned to school after the fires, choosing to stay home and help his father and grandfather rebuild the farm. Alan's father Frank took the decision to restock the cattle herd with Santa and Shorthorn cows. Alan recalls as a youngster attending Buzza's Santa Gertrudis Bull sale in Stanhope with his Dad; mainly remembering fairly willing bulls with big horns. Later the family purchased Kuloomba bulls from Robert and Julie Vise. These cattle later formed part of Alan & Sonia's commercial herd, with some making it through the upgrading process.

Sonia's family had always run cattle, including a stud Hereford herd. "Mum was a good stockperson. She'd grown up on a family farm and used to buy all the vealers out of the markets for her father – in the days when stock markets were really no place for a young woman. I'm not sure my Dad had the patience for cattle work; he broke quite a few ribs (more than once) trying to catch and wrestle the young calves to the ground to be marked. The yard work was always entertaining, if not

a little tense! Dad was more at home with the thoroughbreds at the farm."

## Striking out alone

In 1999 Alan and Sonia made the decision to strike out alone and bought an irrigation farm in Rochester, northern Victoria. The beginnings were far from fancy. Sonia recalls, "There is no learning curve quite like having your own name on the cheque book (and mortgage)! We pulled an old caravan that Alan's parents had given us into the shed, no power, no running water. Robert and Julie Vise (Kuloomba) must have felt sorry for us when they saw us digging the post holes by hand. So the next day they dropped around a posthole auger. We didn't have anything when we started up. We had to go to clearing sales to buy a shovel, a bucket of bolts, a tractor, the lot. The first season we were there was great. We didn't have a combine so we just threw out the oat seed with a super spreader. The oats grew like mad."

## Challenges of the seasons

However, farming life is not easy. Drought hit soon after Alan and Sonia moved to Rochester and irrigation allocations were slashed to zero. Alan worked off-farm for a time and had the privilege of setting up the Burnewang North herd. He brought in a big line of commercial Yarrowonga and Kendara heifers as well as some Diamond H stud heifers. A few stud bulls were purchased to breed replacement heifers and Charolais bulls were put over the remainder. Steer progeny from this mating were sold at the 2010 Finley sale for \$2.70/kg live weight.



Above: The Riverslea brand has been used by the Martin family since the early 1900s when the family had their major focus on wool production at Adelaide Lead and Moore's Flat in central Victoria. Three generations of Martins pose with a Riverslea woolbale - Alan Martin with his father Frank and eldest son Lachlan.  
Below: Alan with his four sons at the Rochester property.





*Sonia and Alan aim to farm in a manner that is sustainable from agricultural, financial and ecological perspectives.*

Meanwhile, with the continuing drought conditions, the couple's commercial herd was taking a hit. Vealer prices were low, the Angus and Murray grey cross cows couldn't cope with less feed, pink eye was rife amongst others, weight gains and fertility were dropping off – in all, that is, except the Santa Gertrudis cows. After years of drought Alan and Sonia decided to focus their energies on developing a Santa Gertrudis Stud herd. The Santa cows were the standouts in their commercial herd, so Alan considers that the breed "selected itself. The Santa's were the cows that would get in calf and rear a good one each year. And I didn't have to pull any of their calves".

And so, Riverslea Santa Gertrudis Stud was registered in 2006.

### Developing the stud

In 2007 Alan decided to concentrate solely on getting his own stud up and running. Lines of heifers were purchased from Yarrawaonga, Diamond H, the Muller families KM, Kendara & Red Rock studs, Yulgilbar, Forest Park, and a few head from Woodstock, Kuloomba and others. With

the assistance of Russell Gray (SGBAA Classifier) all the commercial heifers, from the Martin's own herd and the brought in ones, were sorted and given 2x status if they met the standards. Later heifers were purchased from Benetook, Balgree, The Reefs, and most recently a line of outstanding Georgina Downs females.

### Expanding the property

With the expansion of the herd the property base has increased too. Alan and Sonia have purchased a portion of Alan's parent's farm and leased more ground from them. They also bought the neighbour's farm in 2006. Properties are also farmed around Strathbogie and Colbinabbin. More recently Riverslea is working with Trust For Nature (TFN), strategically grazing native pasture blocks that are maintained by TFN for the preservation of threatened native grass species, and other flora and fauna.

Whilst farming across five or more properties has its obvious challenges, it is proving rewarding too. Properties are located across different climate zones and each is used to fill feed gaps. The stud

cattle stay close to the home blocks. Other blocks are used for grazing and back grounding commercial cattle and steers. Different areas mean that the cattle have to be able to cope with different weather conditions.

Just a week before the tragic Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria Alan dropped a load of heifers off at Sonia's Mum's farm at Dixons Creek to help eat down the grass. The heifers were only there for six days before the fires came through. Alan travelled down and helped put out the fires. The entire property and sheds were burnt but the house was saved (just!).

At daybreak, out of the ashes walked the heifers and Sonia's old horse. Alan reckons, "they just about put their heads under my arm and asked to be taken back home. I ended up loading these beautiful heifers a week later with nothing more than a replica style cattle yard with a ramp and some electric tape around a few posts – not even hooked up. How they survived is beyond comprehension, the way they loaded out of there is an absolute testament to their temperament."



*At Riverslea we back our bulls,  
we back the breed.*

# Best Beef

Steers are brought in and backgrounded on one of the properties and then moved into the Riverslea Best Beef Feedlot. They are fed for 70-100 days and then turned off for either the domestic or export market. At times steers are opportunistically on-sold to other feedlots or through local markets. What is unique about this feedlot in Southern Australia is that the only cattle inducted are Santa Gertrudis or Santa Cross. Why? "Because of the Santa's ability to convert feed, rapidly put on weight, cope with the heat and the lack of production losses that affect other breeds (like bloat, pink eye, ill thrift) - and the feedlot is HGP free. We've had the sales reps here [for HGP's], and they spruiked their figures for weight gains & conversion rates. Our feedlot cattle were already way outstripping the best figures that they could offer."

The feedlot has given the Martin's the opportunity to develop their Best Beef Buy Back Program. Riverslea offers to buy back the progeny from the bulls they sell. "It has been a real winner for us on many fronts. It provides a readymade market for our clients and they can sell to us directly off-farm without incurring the usual sale yard system costs. It allows us also to keep monitoring and assessing our bulls that are out there. We can measure exactly what their progeny are doing, and that of course feeds through to our seedstock operation. The program also helps us source the top quality cattle we are looking for. With the numbers we are doing every animal has to perform. We can't afford to have any shy feeders or production losses - Santa's are delivering on that front for us."

Flexibility is remaining the key to the operation. The excellent seasonal conditions this year allows for finished steers to be turned off on grass. Next year we expect to use only our own home grown feed.

Commercial females are also prepared and sold. Demand for quality Santa Gertrudis females is exceptionally strong, for anything from weaners to older cows, or cow and calf units.



Top: Riverslea Diamond, a 2 year old female, won the Supreme Santa Gertrudis Exhibit National Beef 2009 and was the Grand Champion Female at the Royal Mlebourne Show in 2010, with her calf, Riverslea Flair led by Lachlan.



Above: Riverslea Deputy - the Champion Junior Bull at National Beef 2010. He created a lot of interest for the stud due in part to his exceptionally dark colour. The bull was sold to Southern Star Santa Gertrudis Stud.

Left: A Riverslea Best Beef Bullock - 100 days on feed.



## Accepting a leadership role

Alan has taken on the role of president of the Southern Santa Gertrudis Breeders and the group is back having a display at the Elmore Farming Field Days. "We also do on-farm field days each year in conjunction with Beef Week. I'm also hoping to get a Southern Field Day off the ground in 2011 to promote the Santa Gertrudis breed."

In 2010 Alan was also appointed to the SGB(A)A Marketing & Promotions Committee and the Junior Show Committee. He is keen to help promote the breed across Australia. With so many young sons you can be pretty confident he'll be involved in the Junior Show for years to come!



Bottom: Riverslea Digger - a two time winner of the Hunter Trophy Award (2009 and 2010) and the Santa Gertrudis Association President's Trophy in 2009. His first sons are on the ground now.



*Top: Santa Gertrudis Cattle – with their resistance to bloat - are the perfect fit with lucerne based irrigated pastures.  
Above: Alan, Sonia & Russell Gray with a pen of steers at a recent Riverslea on farm field day.  
Below: Harvesting the corner paddock.*



*Above: Water – the life blood of farming.  
New bore at Riverslea.*

*“As seed stock producers we are committed to breeding commercially relevant bulls that will produce progeny that meet the specifications that improve the bottom line.”*

*Below: In excess of 2000 tonnes of silage and hay will be produced on-farm this year.*



## What next?

The Martins are concentrating on developing a spring calving herd. In the vicinity of 200 females will be joined this season with that number projected to double over the next five years. All the females are joined from 15 months of age and are single sire mated or in the AI program. The commercial herd is run parallel to but separate from the stud herd.

"My aim is for each stud heifer to calve as she turns two, that is the commercial realities of the stud. We'll keep tightening up the joining so we can produce 22-25 month old bulls for the spring bull selling season. I'm aiming to breed soft easy doing bulls with good muscle and a great temperament."

Temperament is especially important at Riverslea. The couple are proud parents of four young boys. "Our home base at Rochester is really intensive and all the bulls are here. The bulls get used to prams, bikes, kites, dogs and kids (lots of them!). Often I need to be able to shift cattle or check cows, and I have the kids in tow. I need to know that the cattle aren't going to be fazed by that" Sonia says.



*The Riverslea brand epitomizes the Martin's attitude to the stud and farming. It is clear, uncomplicated, and distinctive. The brand represents the cycles of life; the cycles of nature. The arrow represents the direction the business is heading and it's anticlockwise because "we need to create our own destiny, take our own path and mostly that is taking the path less travelled."*



Above: Riverslea Bella (P) – One of the first S- heifers from the grading up program.

*"If I could clone this cow I would. She's not quite 4 years old with three tremendous calves on the ground and re-joined. She's always the first one to calve, she does a top job of the calves and she runs on the smell of an oily rag," says Alan.*

## On-Farm Field Day Wednesday 2 February 2011

or call us to arrange an on-farm visit

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## On-Farm Production Sale September 2011

The first Riverslea Santa Gertrudis on-farm production sale will take place in September 2011 with a lineup of bulls, stud heifers and 200 head of commercial females.

Keep an eye on the website for further details. See you there!

*Properties across diverse geographic zones provide flexibility which helps management of climatic and seasonal variability.*

*Six months after the Campaspe Irrigation District was shut down by the State Government – the river floods. What a difference a season can make!*

