

rare understanding

WHEN OLD-FASHIONED FARM BREEDS FACE EXTINCTION, THEY NEED A PRACTICAL CHAMPION LIKE VICTORIAN ORGANIC FARMER FIONA CHAMBERS.

WHEN THE INTERNATIONAL Day for Biodiversity arrives on a gloriously sunny May 22, several canny media outlets in Victoria all have the same idea: let's talk to one of the champions of biodiversity, the managing director of the Rare Breeds Trust of Australia, who also happens to farm several interesting species.

Which is why, when *Country Style* arrives to interview Fiona Chambers, Fernleigh Farm's peaceful cycle of organic crop and stock raising is enlivened by a television crew and a team from the local newspaper. Adding to the hurly-burly, all these visits have coincided with the International Year of the Potato: a horde of excited children from nearby primary schools has returned to a Fernleigh paddock to dig potatoes.

Fiona juggles the visitors with aplomb — and as the cameramen depart she takes us to meet Adorabelle, a heavily pregnant and very rare Wessex Saddleback pig.

Fiona and Nick Chambers, who met at the state's Dookie Agriculture College, have spent 20 years developing the different facets of their 40-hectare farm at Bullarto, in the central highlands of Victoria. They converted to organic practices in 1990, and now use traditional crop rotation to grow a range of vegetables. And today Fernleigh, with 40 sows and eight boars, is the largest Wessex Saddleback stud in the world.

"It's important for me to be involved in local food," Fiona says. "Shipping it across the world doesn't make sense." Maintaining variety is also a guiding principle at Fernleigh, which is why it attracted the biodiversity spotlight. Modern agriculture has its great successes, but the drive for maximised returns has seen many species being driven to extinction by one deemed the most efficient. When a single variety of a staple falls prey to disease, nations can face starvation, as happened during the Irish potato famine of the 19th century, and the decimation of Asian rice harvests during the 1970s.

At Fernleigh the Chambers not only rear Wessex Saddleback pigs but also Shropshire sheep (the world's most popular breed in the late 19th century) and Dorking chickens (an ancient variety introduced to Britain by

the Romans). She became a supporter of rare breeds "by accident": a taste for pork didn't sit easily with an understanding of intensive commercial pig farming.

"I didn't want to contribute to a way of farming that I didn't like, and so I stopped eating pork for five years," she says. Then in 1995 she and Nick bought a Wessex Saddleback sow to breed pigs for their own consumption. Soon after they discovered that the once common species was critically endangered in Australia, while in its native UK there were simply no purebreds left at all.

"There's been a trend towards larger, intensively farmed pigs, and biodiversity — including these old-fashioned breeds — has got lost," Fiona says. "It's exceptionally flavoured meat, there's more fat. People find it very different to commercial pork — and come back for more."

It was a similar story with the Shropshire sheep, which lost favour during the wool boom because of black fibres in its fleece. The sheep are raised for meat, but Fiona and Nick have recently developed an add-on product.

"If we were to sell the wool we'd get nothing, so we're making quilts out of the fleece, which is organically scoured and made into wadding," Fiona says. "By next year we'll be making certified organic Shropshire doonas."

Meanwhile, the kids in the paddock have discovered a trove of organic kipfler, nicola and pink fir apple potatoes, and are bringing boxes to be weighed in a fierce competition between school groups. The project is Fiona's initiative and is close to her heart. She belongs to a slow-food group whose aims include involving children in producing their own food and connecting with the Earth.

"I like working with kids and this project with the primary schools is to link what the children grow with what they eat," she says. And, hopefully, by preserving rare breeds Fiona can ensure those children inherit a richer food culture. The industrial age has seen much of our biodiversity disappear. But not here — "At Fernleigh we've had to rediscover the past, and with that, biodiversity." * *Fernleigh Farm Shop, open 10am–5pm, January–September. 1070 Trentham Road, Bullarto Victoria. For other stockists, telephone (03) 5348 5566 or visit www.fernleighfarms.com*



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Fiona with expectant mum Adorabelle; young Wessex Saddlebacks already learning to range free; school children uncover the potatoes they've planted in one of Fernleigh's paddocks; a handful of prime kipfler potatoes; part of the herd of Shropshire sheep whose fleeces will soon fill doonas.

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