

A photograph of a cowboy in a light-colored hat and dark patterned shirt riding a brown horse in a corral. Several black and white calves are in the foreground and background. The scene is set in a rural, hilly area with trees and a fence.

# life by the reins

PHOTOGRAPHS TONY SHEFFIELD

Hugh Clarke and Alice Le Cras are putting the western into the Southern Highlands, hosting western horsemanship clinics at their Snake Creek Cattle Company in Weral. KAREN TAN visits their busy farm, which also offers accommodation, a farm shop, cafe and pies made from their home-grown beef.



**W**HETHER IT IS for the Australian bushman or the American cowboy, horses have always played a vital role in rounding up livestock. These days, it's become an artform. Picture this: a nimble horse and rider charge towards a herd of cattle in a ranch arena. They screech to a halt, then twist and turn to isolate a cow from the herd. They then start charging backwards and doing fancy manoeuvres in a precision display, of what's known as cutting and reining – the foundations of western-style riding from the Old West culture.

Most of us have never seen, let alone experienced performing these incredible skills used by cattle herders and drovers. Not so for cattle folk Hugh Clarke and Alice Le Cras, founders of Snake Creek Cattle Company in Werai, about 10 minutes from Moss Vale. They're living the modern-day western dream.

Through their western horsemanship clinics, the couple entice legends of the sport to their property to teach these skills to eager students. But as Hugh explains, it is much more than a horse-riding experience. It's a fully integrated paddock-to-plate gourmet and destination ranch adventure.

"The main focus for the riders has been our cutting experiences – rounding up and training with cattle at weekend training clinics in our ranch arena," says Hugh. "But we also offer specialist reined cow-horse lessons and the more traditional 'Australian' campdraft training, with our herd of cattle, and bison. It's challenging, but always a lot of fun."

"There's a big bison called Fluffy that comes to one of the clinics," says Alice. "He seems to have a competitive attitude with my horse, which can lead to a dynamic interaction. It's both entertaining and thrilling for the spectators, as we work him into position – exciting stuff!"

Hugh says Snake Creek Cattle Company began with his family's steakhouse operations, providing quality beef for NSW regional pubs. Snake Creek flowed through his family farm in Mandurama in mid-western NSW. The ranch name was retained when the couple moved 250 kilometres south-east to the Southern Highlands 13 years ago.

The western horsemanship enterprise is a key focus and passion for the business, which has since expanded with the

**ABOVE** HUGH CLARKE AND ALICE LE CRAS AT THEIR WERAI PROPERTY.

**LEFT** ESTEEMED TRAINER PHIL WEBB AT A WESTERN HORSEMANSHIP CLINIC.



**FROM TOP** SNAKE CREEK CATTLE COMPANY RANCH ARENA DURING A CLINIC; ALICE TRAINING WITH CATTLE; HUGH (RIGHT) WITH PHIL, WHO HE CALLS 'THE MASTER'.



addition of a farm shop and cafe, pie company, accommodation and a brewery and distillery.

"We have cattle and horse yards and paddocks, and the main ranch arena is set up with a viewing grandstand," says Alice. "The farm shop has an adjoining nursery which grows our chillies, herbs and citrus fruits, and our paddock-to-plate outlet includes selling our premium grass-fed, F1 Wagyu beef and pies. F1 is a full blood Wagyu bull over an Angus cow."

These days, almost all of Snake Creek Cattle Company's beef cuts range (including scotch fillet, sirloin, brisket, sausages and mince) is sold from their farm shop, but a handful of other outlets supply their goods. "Our pies are available from our farm shop and the Bowral Co-op in the Highlands," says Hugh. "We also supply produce and pies to our family-owned hotels: the Imperial Hotel in Paddington, and The Resch House in Sydney CBD, and the Mando Pub in Mandurama."

When you first meet Hugh, he appears larger than life. Literally! At around 198cm (six and a half feet), he is very tall and laid back, and could easily appear in a western movie. The former country publican cum corporate high flyer is warm and welcoming. "I'm a publican who worked his way into the corporate world, swapping RM Williams boots for pin-striped suits," says Hugh. "I ran businesses across the country, mostly recovery or trouble shooting for families and investors. Like many country folk, we then had a hankering to get back to the rural lifestyle.

"We've always used horses for our stockwork but things have really ramped up over the past few years. We breed cutting horse lines, we've acquired some really well-trained horses and we have a string of clinic horses. All our horses work in day-to-day mustering, and we show together as a family [with son Cody, 17] with the National Cutting Horse Association.

"We love the quarter horse breed. They have great minds, are super athletic, quick and agile. Every horse has a unique personality. Our horsemanship program has developed off the back of our long-term involvement with quarter horses and more recently the cutting industry. Reining competitions essentially show off the skills necessary in working ranch horses, but in the confines of an arena."



**ABOVE** BRIDLES AND RANCH SIGN; **PHIL** TEACHING RIDERS AT THE CLINIC ON AN AUTUMN AFTERNOON. **BELOW** THE PROPERTY'S FARM CLUB SHOP INCLUDES A BAKERY SPECIALISING IN GOURMET PIES, MADE FROM THE COUPLE'S F1 WAGYU BEEF.

Hugh and Alice met through business ventures 25 years ago. Alice hails from Jersey in the Channel Islands, and life these days couldn't be more disparate from her upbringing on a dairy farm on an island in the English Channel.

Alice's family acquired their Southern Highlands property many decades ago. "My grandmother purchased the original part of the farm in the early 1980s, and we have had the opportunity to transform it since then," Alice says. "We run up to 500 head of cattle here depending on the season."

While Hugh and Alice have different backgrounds, they share the same ambitions and passions, and have made a wonderful life together on their 566 hectare (1400 acre) farm.

"We were late starters in the western riding sport," says Hugh, "but we fell in love with the quality of trained horses,

the cutting horse community, and the opportunity to bring guests to the farm for a pathway to equine learning and good old-fashioned country hospitality."

Together with Cody, Alice and Hugh happily manage to combine their recreational competition pursuits with their unique business. It's an idyllic life for Cody, a final year boarder at a Sydney school who comfortably straddles city and country life. He also plays rugby and is currently undertaking an internship with Inglis Rural Property, learning about property sales and valuations.

"I travel home on weekends to help on the farm and with the clinics, and I always look forward to my holidays," Cody says. "As long as I can remember, Dad and Alice have always been 'jobs on!' I do whatever needs to be done, from cattle





PHOTO COWGIRL CREATIVE - T PALMER

**ABOVE** CODY CLARKE ON 'SCOOTER', A 'METALLIC CAT' SIREDED QUARTER HORSE. **BELOW** VISITORS AT THE FARM CLUB SHOP, OPEN WEDNESDAY TO SUNDAY, 8AM TO 4PM.

management to the horse programs and the farm shop.

"My routine includes feeding up and checking the stock early in the mornings, the dogs, eggs, the day crew – no day is the same," says Cody.

"We normally work horses on a program including stockwork, exercising and training in the arena. There are foals and breeding duties, feed to pick up, saddles and tack to clean for shows and clinics, and looking after our guests."

Clinics are open to those who own a horse and are reasonably confident riders, through to high level competitors, but beginners aren't catered for. It is not a riding school.

On a balmy autumn day, *Highlife* visits as an eclectic group of riders take to the ranch to cut cattle with one of the country's godfathers of the sport, Phil Webb. The group includes 34-year-old mother-of-two Aneka Brodbeck, from Wollongong.

Why does she love the sport? "It's the whole vibe. The

countryside. The cool western gear even! Obviously, the horses. And riding ranch style is just awesome. But also the really interesting people you meet along the way," Aneka says.

Seeing the group together, it becomes apparent that western riders cannot be stereotyped. Each student has their own reasons to attend, but most are keen to improve their skills with one of the best cattle-cutting instructors in the business.

It's time well spent for Aneka, who not only improves her riding ability but sows the seeds for future goals. "More technical stuff about moving the shoulders and the hip over. How to track a cow a little bit clearer. I had a general idea but I am much clearer on that now... and yeah, I'm a little bit more hooked," she says. "I would love to inch into a competition."

Phil Webb, from Wagga Wagga in southern NSW, has been riding for decades and has taken all before him in the sport, in terms of awards, experience and accolades. "I've spent a lot of time in America and still try to go back every few years to continue fine tuning my skills with the best western riders in the world," he says. "Then I bring that knowledge and experience back to Australia to pass on to the newer recruits of the sport."

"I love helping people get to that next level. Learning how to make your horse softer, more flexible, more efficient in every manoeuvre, and I need to hand that knowledge on, or there is a real risk of the sport dying out in Australia."

Snake Creek Cattle Company horsemanship programs run throughout the year, except for winter. Hugh and Alice say what started as a bit of horsing around has evolved into much more than they expected. "We have a great location just off the main highway," says Hugh. "Guests come from all over Australia, and there are more local riders every season too. While western riding is not exactly flourishing in the Southern Highlands, it is slowly gaining in popularity."

"Our next step is to run a tour to Texas for clinics, and hopefully bring groups over from the US a few times a year. We have built up wonderful relationships with some of the best cow-horse and cutting trainers in the country. Without them, the program would not exist. They recognise the opportunity to create a pathway into the sport for new people, and it's growing the sport." **HL**

