



McLeod's Daughters reunion LOOK AT US NOW!



It's been 11 years since the series burst onto our screens, and the girls of Drover's Run are as gorgeous as ever. Michala, Bridie, Jessica and Lisa tell PHILLIP KOCH how they stop the clock

LISA CHAPPELL

Claire McLeod (first 3 seasons)
Lisa spent the past five years in her birthplace of New Zealand, but now the happily single actress lives in Sydney with her adored five-year-old Shih Tzu, George.

A very youthful 44, Lisa insists she does nothing extreme to maintain her movie-star looks, but she does credit 14 years of being a vegetarian for her enviable figure.

"I'm a bit annoying – I don't work hard at it," she confesses. "I eat a lot and I drink, but I don't have a car, so I do walk everywhere, and I walk my dog George a lot too.

"A girlfriend who's known me for 25 years recently said she wanted to become a vegetarian, because my figure hadn't changed in that time. It has helped stabilise my weight. I'm not stick-thin, but I'm happy with the way I look."

Lisa embraces getting older, saying the only real difference is in the types of acting roles she is now offered.

"I don't have a problem with ageing in terms of looks, and I don't feel the need to get Botox," she says. "I'm not saying it's wrong for people to do it – I just don't have any problem with looking my age."

Lisa is single following her 2004 divorce, but admits she may have missed her opportunity to become a mum.

"That's the sad aspect of getting older, but I'm at peace with that now," says Lisa, who relished the time she spent back in Auckland with her family, including her dance-instructor sister Catherine and eight-year-old nephew, Josh.

"It was time to go home and be a daughter, an aunty and a sister," she explains.

Now, Lisa – who followed up *McLeod's Daughters* with a role in TV series *Stingers*, is ready to get several acting and writing projects off the ground, after an enjoyable theatre stint in New Zealand.



Country cuties to city chic!

Nobody rocks an Akubra like these girls, but Michala, Bridie, Lisa and Jessica relish a chance to glam it up, city-girl style.



At one point, you could switch on a TV almost anywhere in the world and you'd see an episode of *McLeod's Daughters*, the sweeping romantic drama series celebrating the pioneering spirit of Aussie women on the land.

"I'm still getting mail from the Netherlands, Germany and Italy," laughs Michala Banas, who played Kate. "I think it was such a great thing to be a part of, because lots of things come and go, but this had a lasting effect on people."

Michala left halfway through the final season, in 2009, but fans are still smitten with the series' strong and independent female characters.

"I was petrified when I got the job, because it involved horse riding, sheep, cows and dirt. I'm a city girl, and I really didn't know anything about that stuff," she admits. "So I learned more

than I can tell you. I can drive a tractor and I can – badly – shear a sheep!"

Michala can't believe it's around 10 years since Lisa Chappell and Jessica Napier left the show, as they've barely changed – though Lisa has lopped off her locks. But it's Bridie Carter who really amazes her.

"Bridie looks exactly the same – it's quite remarkable," she says. "But then, they all look remarkable. I think it's inevitable that we have all changed, but my time on *McLeod's* really does seem just like yesterday."

Bridie, Lisa and Jessica were in the original cast, which included Rachael Carpani, Aaron Jeffery, Myles Pollard, Sonia Todd, John Jarratt and Brett Tucker. Simone Jade Mackinnon joined in Season 3, while Matt Passmore, Luke Jacobz and Abi Tucker starred in later seasons.

"I still miss Claire," says Lisa of her character, who was killed off in a truck accident in 2003, leaving fans shattered. "I loved playing her, but she was very different to me. She wasn't very feminine, but I'm very feminine, expressive and communicative. I tend to spend a lot of my time 'in the clouds.'"

"*McLeod's* ignited my love with the countryside," says Bridie, who left the show in 2006 after nursing her first-born, Otis, on set.

Jessica agrees: "It was so beautiful to be in the country and surrounded by animals. And you never knew what to expect – it would go from dust storms to rain and extreme heat. It was tough, but I loved my time there."

All but one of the four actresses is now back in the big smoke. They tell us how their lives have changed since the show ended, and share their secrets to staying in such amazing shape...

BRIDIE CARTER

Tess Silverman-McLeod (first 6 seasons)

Bridie's still breathing in fresh country air, but nowhere near the *McLeod's* location in rural South Australia. She lives on a property near Byron Bay on the NSW far north coast, and continues to travel interstate for work. Married to Michael Wilson, she is mum to Otis, 7, and Tobias, 2, and stepmum to James, 15.

"I adore my kids and husband," smiles Bridie, 42. "I'm very grateful for my family life – it's number-one for me – but I'm also passionate about my work. I need to work. It's the great juggling act that all women know, work and family, and I believe we can have both."

Bridie most recently starred in *Wild Boys*, *Rescue Special Ops*, as well as the movie *I Love You Too*, and for the past two years has been developing her own series.

No doubt living in a natural paradise helps the busy mum maintain her healthy glow. And that flawless skin, she tells us, is largely a result of great genes, her skincare regime ("I use SKII"), plus a healthy lifestyle and diet that includes lots of raw vegetables.

Bridie was a vegetarian before she started work on *McLeod's* in 2000, when she was diagnosed with an iron deficiency. She ate meat from then on, to help boost her energy levels, especially with her punishing workload.

"I love cooking for my family – most of the time – and cook every night," she says. "Because we're in the country, we don't have the luxury of take-out, but I don't feed my family anything processed or pre-prepared. Cooking with love makes all the difference."

Her healthy approach has clearly paid off, although, as she points out, "I'm not a size 6, I'm size 10. I'm a woman with curves and I try



and embrace my figure. I can't eat whatever I want, but I'm not into deprivation. Come Friday night, in my house it's homemade pizzas and chocolate. You need some treats!"

And how about nips and tucks – for or against? "I'm very anti it! I don't think manufactured beauty is very interesting."





MICHALA BANAS

Kate Manfredi (seasons 4-8)
While life "on the farm" kept her fit, when it comes to exercise, Michala's the first to admit she could do more.

"I go for walks, but really, I'm terrible," says the 34-year-old. "I'm quite lazy in terms of exercising, and that's the honest truth. I'm just lucky, because I'm naturally small."

"I have a generally healthy diet, but it's more through need than desire – I'm intolerant to many foods. A few years ago I got a virus, and was diagnosed with fructose malabsorption, which means I'm allergic to certain foods because

they do crazy things to my body. So, I eat pretty healthy food now. It's a curse, because I do love a meat pie!"

Michala says the physical aspect of *McLeod's* was initially daunting, although she fell in love with the great outdoors during her four-year stint.

"There was something really empowering about hanging out with guys who taught us how to ride and work with animals," she says.

These days, Michala's hanging out with just one guy – fiancé Kade. She announced her engagement to the actor/videographer last year, and the pair plan to marry next year.

For now, Michala, who also appeared in *Winners & Losers*, is excited to be starring alongside Glenn Robbins and Robyn Nevin in upcoming series *Upper Middle Bogan*.

JESSICA NAPIER

Becky Howard (first 3 seasons)
Since becoming a mum to little Emily last September, Jess has toned down her workout regime.

"I used to be a mad exerciser. Now I just take the time I get! My husband [David] commits to coming home early two nights a week so I can do a gym class, usually yoga or spin."

Maintaining a fitness regime during pregnancy saw Jessica bounce back from her baby weight quickly, however, she's quick to point out to other mums that she didn't put a huge amount of pressure on herself to get back into shape.

"I just gave my body what it wanted and nourished myself," says Jessica, who's been a vegetarian since the age of four. "I kept exercising the whole way through, and practised yoga and did boxing until I was 30 weeks pregnant. I did lots of walking in the last 10 weeks."

Her great love is Ashtanga yoga, and she does a 90-minute session every Sunday, while Emily provides lots of incidental weight training.

"I push an eight-kilo baby around in a seven-kilo pram, which any mum will tell you is punishing!"

Jess has also been kept busy on the small screen. She'll be seen later this year in new ABC series *Janet King*, a spin-off of the successful legal drama *Crownies*.



Pictures: Peter Brew-Bevan. Clothing: –Jessica: George Cross dress; Wittner heels; Lisa: Mesop dress; Wittner heels; Michala: Chraine Brown dress; Wittner heels; Bridie: Harry Who dress; Winsor Smith heels.