

restaurant

For the professional and the passionate



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Globe-troughing

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Five restaurants
Five continents...
One week

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BLOW YOUR BUDGET

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Get the Wa Gyu rollin'

The Japanese methods for rearing cattle have come to the UK - but can we cut it?



Craig Walsh at Lucie's Farm
with his Highland Cattle,
raised by the Wa Gyu method

Words
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Mitchell

Kobe cattle are famed as much for their pampered lifestyles as for the expensive, luxurious beef they produce. But these days, modern farming methods are replacing beer and massage down on the farm.

Do you ever get that stiffness in your back and neck caused by tension? You know the kind where you really wish you had a masseur on hand to perform some magic with her fingers. Just think of those fingers, kneading into your shoulder muscles, easing out all of the tension from the day. It's a nice thought, isn't it?

Well, here's something for you to think about. The next time you're aching and you don't have a masseur to hand, relax in the knowledge that somewhere in the world there is a pissed cow getting precisely the treatment you crave.

Yes, we're going to delve into the fantastical, almost mythical world of Kobe and the equally mythical Wa Gyu (or Wagyu) method of rearing beef.

It's incredible to think that the world's most expensive and luxurious beef originated in a country that prohibited the eating of beef until 1868. It was then that Prince Mutsuhito came to the throne as the Meiji Emperor and led the Meiji Restoration – a campaign by ambitious Japanese industrialists to adopt a more Western approach to life.

Even with the ban lifted, the Japanese people were slow to accept beef as a normal part of their diets, and it wasn't until the 1950s, when the harvesting of rice was mechanised and more land was made available for grazing, that they were able to start slaughtering cattle on a large scale.

Due to the rugged Japanese geography, different breeding and feeding techniques were developed. The most successful area was the Kobe region, and only cattle slaughtered in this

region can be designated as legitimate 'Kobe' beef. If it is slaughtered anywhere else, it is simply known as Wagyu, ('Wa' means Japanese style and 'Gyu' cattle).

Because of the geographical impediments to travel, different approaches to cattle selection and breeding were developed from region to region. Also, the practice of crossbreeding, much used in the West, was not considered acceptable by Japanese farmers, which allowed for the development of very long genetic bloodlines.

All of these factors helped to produce a succulent and much sought after cut of beef. But the factors that create the most intrigue are the near-mythic techniques that the Japanese use to create the perfect beast; beer, massage and sake.

Although it is true that they are occasionally fed beer, most cattle in Japan are raised in total confinement and are on feed from birth to slaughter, because pasture is simply not available. Sometimes, during the summer months when the interaction of fat cover, temperature and humidity depresses feed intake, many cattle go off feed. When this happens, beer is fed to the cattle to stimulate their appetites.

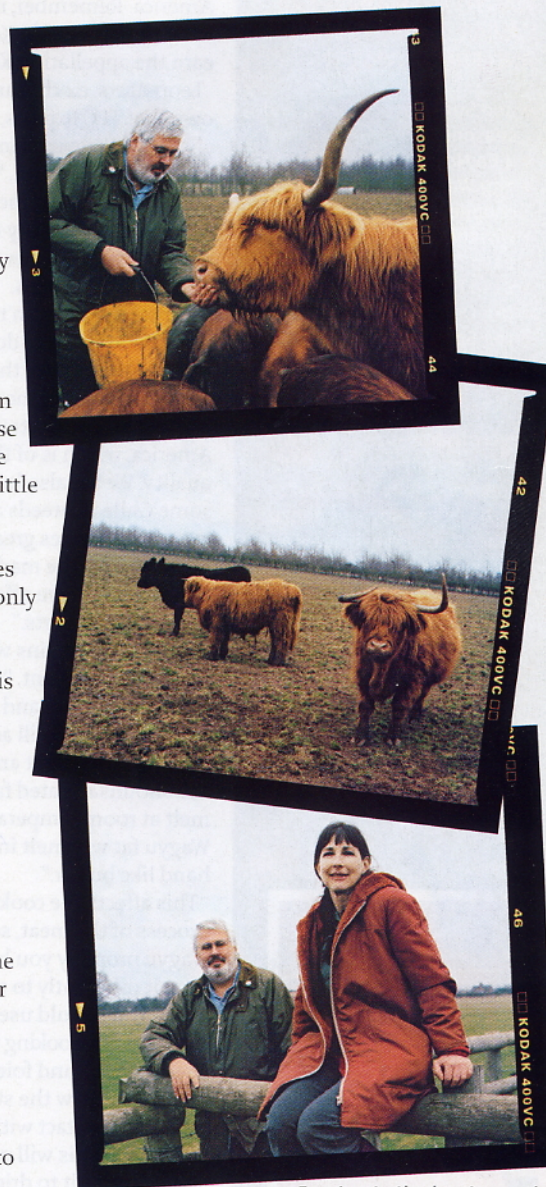
'The massaging also prolongs the length of time that cattle can be fed before they go to slaughter, and thereby increases fat distribution'

It is also true that the cattle are sometimes massaged, although the widely held belief that this practice affects the marbling of the beef is not the case. Most cattle are tethered for months on end and have no opportunity for exercise. The massaging is done to make the animal more comfortable and to relieve the stress caused by the stiffness

that results from their inactivity. The massaging also prolongs the length of time that cattle can be fed before they go to slaughter, and thereby increases fat distribution.

Brushing sake onto the hide of the animal was a way to make the it look more appealing at market. Japanese beef farmers believed that a healthy hair coat and soft skin resulted in a better quality carcass. These days, farmers tend to believe that massages and beer do little to promote better beef, and aside from occasional competitions, the techniques are seldom practised – and only then in order to keep the tradition alive.

As we said, true Kobe beef is



From top: An Aberdeen Angus gets a massage whether she likes it or not; Highland cattle queue at the bar... then walk home; Craig and Marjorie Walsh



75-year-old Mikichi Kobu's prize-winning Kobe operation in Matsusaka, Japan



WAGYU GUNKAN WAGYU BEEF, OSCIETRA CAVIAR, SPRING ONION AND FRESH GINGER

- ❖ 40g Sushi Rice, cooked and seasoned
- ❖ 4 Ea Nori Sheets
- ❖ 75g Wagyu Beef, finely chopped
- ❖ Wasabi, 1 pinch
- ❖ 1 tsp Soy Sauce
- ❖ 1 tsp Ponzu Sauce
- ❖ 16g Oscieta Caviar
- ❖ 10g Spring Onions
- ❖ 4g Fresh Ginger Paste

- Form the Sushi Rice into four even, thumb-sized logs. Wrap each log with a nori sheet.
- Combine the Wagyu beef with wasabi, soy and ponzu sauce and add a little cracked black pepper.
- Spoon the beef mixture on top of the rice but inside the Nori.
- Top with caviar, spring onion and ginger.

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Japanese is, in fact, reared in America. Remember, it only has to be slaughtered in Kobe to earn the appellation Kobe.

Leon Aarts, ex chef and co-owner of TFC Express, has made all things Wagyu an important part of his repertoire. "Wagyu is the most flavoursome beef in the world, it is totally unique, different to any other variety available," he insists.

Although Aarts can't sell the good Kobe stuff, he does import meat from many of the same sources as the Japanese. "We get our meat from Australia and America, which is of the highest quality. We are also looking at some Chilean breeds at the moment; it tastes great and could change the market because it is more affordable than other imports."

Aarts also explains why Wagyu beef is so succulent. "It is all down to genetics and the diet of grain. The grain will add more flavour to the meat and produce a monounsaturated fat that will melt at room temperature; Wagyu fat will melt in your hand like butter."

This affects the cooking process of the meat, so to cook Wagyu properly you have to treat it differently to regular steak. You should use the same quick-searing cooking techniques used for tuna and foie gras. You shouldn't allow the steak to remain in contact with heat for too long as this will melt all the fat and cause it to drip, resulting in a tough, dry (not to mention expensive) meat.

'The grain will add more flavour to the meat and produce a monounsaturated fat that will melt at room temperature; Wagyu fat will melt in your hand'

With this in mind, Craig Walsh, at Lucie's Farm in Worcester has adapted the techniques used with Wagyu cattle and applied them to the breeding of his Aberdeen Angus cows. "Wagyu is fabulous for Japanese-style cooking, but we are breeding a meat that is more acceptable to Western tastes," he explains. "Essentially we are rearing Aberdeen Angus in the style of Kobe."

The cattle are pampered in the traditional style, receiving three massages a week, a litre of beer a day and are even sent to a 'boutique' abattoir one at a time to ensure that they have as relaxed a life as possible. All of this takes about 23 months from birth to slaughter, which helps explain the price of this delicacy.

No matter what your beliefs are on this matter, it seems apparent that a diet of grain, beer and massage results in a far superior cut of beef. There could be a lot to learn from this. I for one will be increasing my beer intake and my visits to the local massage parlour. I'm not so sure about the diet of grain though. **1**

- TFC Express, 020 7635 3651, www.tfcexpress.co.uk
- Lucie's Farm, 01905 830380, www.luciesfarm.com

Get Fresh Gill Mullins

Continental Spring sprung

❖ **The weather's picking up on the Continent**, which means salads are improving. "Spanish rocket has already started to come down in price (£7.50/kg) and other leaves will follow suit," says Tony Booth on Borough Market. Italy is also yielding some nice produce, with Philip Britten at Solstice recommending barba di frate (monk's beard) and sweet spiky artichokes. French sea kale is available, and English should be in soon. Also from the home front are reliable roots and cabbages, including crisp, frost-hardy January Kings. Although the season is starting to tail off, you can still get good English apples, such as Russet, Cox and Bramley, and forced Yorkshire 'Champagne' rhubarb is coming through well. L Booth Ltd, 020 7378 8666; Solstice, 020 7498 7700, www.solstice.co.uk

❖ ALSO LOOK OUT FOR

- ❖ **Red mullet:** a steal at just £3.50-9.50/kg, with line-caught sea bass still cheap and plentiful (£7.50-10.50/kg, compared to farmed at £4-5.50/kg). Cod and haddock are great value (£5/kg), as is John Dory (£8.50-11.50) and plaice (just £3.50/kg). Jeff Steadman at Chamberlain and Thelwell, 020 7987 2639
- ❖ **Best end of lamb:** very cheap at £3.10-3.50/kg, although prices could be up as we go to press due to Valentine's Day. Chines are also a bargain at £2.20-2.65/kg. Paul Andrade at David Andrade Ltd, 020 7236 1173
- ❖ **English pork:** weak trade so prices are keen - try leg at £1-1.20/kg and loin at £1.90-98/kg. Jimmy Wilmot at David Andrade Ltd
- ❖ **Scotch topside:** now down to £4.25/kg. Doug Eland at Peter Tocher, 020 7236 9561
- ❖ **US mushrooms:** still plenty of good quality black trumpet (£20/kg), pied de mouton (£18/kg) and chanterelle (£14/kg). L Booth Ltd
- ❖ **The last partridges and pheasants:** until around February 18 and then it's on to pigeons (£2.25 each). Everleigh Farm Shop, 01264 850344