

BEER, MESSAGE, MARBLING

## British farmers' 'wagyu' beef strains prove a hit

By WILLIAM HOLLINGWORTH

LONDON (Kyodo) Following the mad cow disease scare in Britain and a desire to eat better quality food, Japanese beef is increasing in popularity here, and some farmers are using Japanese techniques to improve the quality of their meat.

Since 2000, farmer David Wynne Finch has been breeding Japanese "wagyu" cattle at his farm in Wales and has seen his beef being snapped up by London's top shops and hotels.



"Wagyu" cattle graze on the Voelas Hall estate in north Wales. KYODO PHOTO

He imported the embryos of mixed black wagyu (literally Japanese cattle) from the United States and implanted them in some standard cross-bred beef cows.

Just as the farmers in Japan, Wynne Finch lets his cattle live a stress-free life on his Welsh estate. They are well-fed with grain and given beer in the summer months.

They are also massaged — albeit by a machine — to make sure all the muscles are used and the fat is distributed into the meat.

The beer meanwhile stimulates the animals' appetites.

The result is meat highly marbled with unsaturated fat with a relatively high percentage of omega-3 fatty acids. The beef has a velvety texture and is revered by gourmets.

Wynne Finch first generated the market in Britain by importing wagyu beef in 1999. In 2003, he began

slaughtering his first six cows.

The meat is sent to a wholesaler who then sells it to some of Britain's top restaurants and stores, including Nobu and Harrods. It currently retails at around \$ 170 per kg.

"There's more demand than supply. At a European level, wagyu is a product which is here to stay. I sell whatever I can get and could sell 10 times the amount I do," Wynne Finch said.

Wynne Finch currently has around 30 breeding cows and has also sold some breeding cattle to other farmers on the back of the meat's popularity.

Back in the Japan, the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Ministry announced plans last year to have meat shops use the label "wagyu" only for meat from cattle born and raised in Japan.

Wynne Finch believes this represents a tendency for Japanese to be "secretive and snobby" about their beef, but he says he is not aiming at the Japanese market in any case.



Barbara Grzechowiak, who works for Lucies Farm Ltd. in Britain, exercises a Berkshire black and a Tamworth pig in a swimming pool. PHOTO COURTESY OF LUCIES FARM LTD./KYODO

Asked why he got involved in the production of wagyu, Wynne Finch said, "For me it was the eating experience. It was nothing to do with BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy). I

wanted to produce the best beef possible. However, the market was helped by BSE."

The wagyu breed has only been exported out of Japan on three occasions. Wynne Finch's animals derive from some wagyu sent to the United States in 1976 for research purposes.

While the wagyu breed is considered indigenous to Japan, DNA testing has shown it was influenced by European breeds brought about through cross-breeding in the early 1900s

Wagyu cattle are black or brown. In Japan, the blacks originate in four areas — Tottori, Tajima in Hyogo Prefecture, Shimane and Okayama — each with slightly different attributes. Other types of wagyu hail from Kochi and Kumamoto.

There has been much talk in the West about the wonders of Kobe beef. This is essentially wagyu bred in the Kobe region.

Craig Walsh, who originally hails from Hawaii, has been rearing Aberdeen Angus cows at Lucies Farm in the English Midlands since 2002 using techniques from Japan. His Scottish Kobe meat is the result of his cows being hand-massaged three times a week and fed with grain and lager beer.

The result is "ruby red" tasty beef that is less fatty than wagyu and probably more appealing to health-conscious Europeans. Walsh says much of the beef in Britain tends to be chewy because the cattle is fed on grass.

His Scottish Kobe is proving popular with Japanese living in Britain but, due to its cost, it is unlikely be sold in local supermarkets anytime soon.

Walsh also rears Berkshire black pigs, which he says are also known in Japan as "kurobuta" and whose meat is highly prized. But, he says, "we outdo the Japanese by feeding them with beer." The pigs like to swig the beer from a glass, whereas the cattle will only take the beer if it is mixed up with their grain.

Pigs do not like to be massaged, however, so to ensure that their muscles are developed and their fat has the marbling, Walsh takes them swimming in a small pool.

Darren Pluess, who has a farm in Cornwall, in the southwest of England, has been using Japanese techniques on his cattle since reading about them on a Japanese Web site.

The dairy farmer, who has a herd of Limousin cattle, said: "Consumers think that the meat is very tender and tasty. It's slightly more marbled than other beef, lighter in color and more oily."

Pluess gives his cattle traditional Cornish real ale and

massages them using a special brush.

"I do get good feedback and repeat orders. It's very rare for British farmers to use these techniques. Other farmers think it's slightly strange . . . but a lot of people like to know that their animals are being well looked after."

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