



## FEATURE: British beef farmers look to Japan, 'wagyu' snapped up by gourmets

by William Hollingworth

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Following the mad-cow disease scare in Britain and a desire to eat better quality food, Japanese beef is increasing in popularity in Britain, and some farmers are using Japanese techniques to improve the quality of their produce.

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

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

As the Japanese farmers do, Wynne Finch lets his wagyu live a very stress-free life on his Welsh estate. They are well fed with grain and massaged -- albeit by a machine -- and they are allowed to have beer in the summer months. Massages make sure all the muscles are used and ensures the fat is distributed into the meat, and beer stimulates the animals' appetites.

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

Wynne Finch first generated the market in Britain by importing wagyu meat in 1999, and then in 2003 he began slaughtering his first batch of six cows.

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

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

Last year, Japan's agriculture ministry announced plans to have meat shops use the product labeling of



"wagyu" only for meat from cattle born and raised in Japan.

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

Asked why he got involved in the production of luxury meat, he said, "For me it was the eating experience, it was nothing to do with BSE. 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 that it was influenced by European breeds brought about through cross-breeding in the early 1900s.

The wagyu breed comes in black and brown colors. The blacks originate from four areas of Japan -- Tottori, Tajima, Shimane and Okayama -- each with slightly different attributes. Other types of wagyu originate from Kochi on the island of Shikoku and Kumamoto on the island of Kyushu.

There has been much talk in the West recently about the wonders of Kobe beef and this is essentially wagyu beef 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 which 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 at local supermarkets for some time to come.

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 in order to ensure that their muscles are developed and their fat has the marbling, Walsh takes them swimming in a small pool.

Darren Pluess, who as a farm in Cornwall, in the

southwest of England, has been using Japanese techniques on his cattle since reading about them on a Japanese website.

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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