

Fat Of The Land

by GABRIEL HALL

Photos Courtesy of BRANT LAKE WAGYU



Globally, the legendary moniker “Kobe beef” always makes diners salivate. What many don’t realize is that Kobe beef is only a single example of this genre. Many different variations of this meat are produced in Japan, including the famous Matsusaka and Yonezawa varieties. All varieties are collectively referred to as “wagyu”.



The classification of wagyu encompasses four breeds of cattle, all of which have a genetic predisposition to producing intense marbling: The Japanese Black (Kuroge Washu), Japanese Brown (Akage Washu), Japanese Polled (Mukaku Washu) and the Japanese Short Horn (Nihon Tankaku Washu). Meat from these breeds often rate on the higher half of the twelve point Beef Marbling Scale (BMS).

The export of wagyu meat and genetics is strictly controlled by the Japanese. This results in very few purebred wagyu herds outside of Japan, forcing international producers to cross-breed cattle to produce local wagyu-cross beef.

Alberta is no stranger to raising cattle, which makes it a natural place to develop local wagyu-cross beef. Michelle Ball of Southern Alberta’s Brant Lake Wagyu comments, “We produce a wagyu/Angus cross. It consistently grades in the top AAA or Prime. Our beef is dry aged 21 days to enhance palatability.”

She continues, “Barley is the predominate grain fed to these cattle after grazing on grass for ten to fifteen months. It takes wagyu longer to mature - the breed is not as heavily muscled. We feed our wagyu cross cattle much longer than traditional or commercial cattle; up to 500 days, whereas North American cattle are typically fed for 120-160 days. We have decided to grow them slowly and sustainably without growth hormones.”

When asked about the legend of sake and beer-fed massaged cows, Ball notes, “This is a Japanese technique believed only to aid in digestion and induce hunger during humid seasons. It appears to have no effect on the meat’s flavour.”

Another perceived fallacy is the fat content in wagyu. We often equate excess fat with unhealthy eating, but Ball reassures us that when consumed in moderation, the opposite is true, “In reality, research done by Texas A&M, Washington State University and other institutions has shown that mono-unsaturated fatty acid to saturated fatty

acid ratio is up to two times higher in wagyu beef. In addition, the levels of Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids are 30% higher than other breeds. For consumers, this all equates to reduced cholesterol and protection against many diseases.”

Creating diversity can only be a boon to our cattle industry, “It is another great branded beef consumers can choose from. We are offering consumers a locally raised, healthy and superior tasting beef that is unique to Canada and North America” Ball concludes. It appears that Ball is spot on, as producers and consumers have both rushed to embrace local wagyu-cross beef, not just because of the mythology behind it, but because it is a truly lascivious product.

Gabriel Hall is a freelance writer who has traveled to many parts of the world to explore food and culture. His website, www.levoyagegourmand.com and his twitter, @voyagegourmand are living archives of his experiences.