

First it was caviar, foie gras and truffles creating a stir, now Japanese-style Kobe beef has tongues wagging and mouths watering across the globe at almost R1 500/kg.

Kobe is the appellation for the beef that comes from a Japanese cattle breed called Wagyu. In the Japanese language 'Wa' means Japanese style and 'gyu' means cattle. This specific breed, originally from the Asian mainland, arrived in Japan's Kobe region in the second century AD and was mainly used for labour in rice paddies.



Eating meat from four-legged animals was prohibited in Japan for more than a thousand years prior to 1868 when the Meiji Restoration began, signifying a turn to the West. Buddhist influences were primarily responsible for this dietary restriction, but other cultural factors and the need to protect draught animals in times of famine may have reinforced the taboo.

WAGYU

The caviar of beef



The Japanese eventually discovered Wagyu beef's buttery, melt-in-your-mouth flavour and over successive generations the breed was refined for a broader commercial market.

The Wagyu breed is genetically predisposed to intense marbling and produces a higher percentage of oleaginous, unsaturated fat than any other breed of cattle. The result is meat with small, finely interspersed specks of fat. The marbling is so subtle and consistent that, when prepared correctly, it bastes the steak from its interior to ensure juiciness and depth of flavour.

Special treatment

What makes Wagyu beef so intriguing is the folkloric stories about how these cattle are being treated in order to produce the 'caviar of all beef'. Regular massages are administered to promote tender muscles, and *sake* skin treatments are given as softness of the coat and skin is believed to impact meat quality. On top of that, they are fed beer to stimulate their appetites in summer months when the heat depresses their food intake.

Unusual diet

Recent decades have seen the development of select breeding programmes in countries with more grazing pastures at their disposal. These countries include Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States and apart from the greater availability in land, it is less expensive than in Japan.

Wagyu herds are fed maize, alfalfa, native grasses, soybean based protein, distiller grains and chopped hay. Some farmers even feed their herds the by-products of barley and small grains from beer and alcohol companies. The mash apparently has 40% protein content, and because it is pre-fermented the cattle do not have to use a lot of energy to digest it.

Normally, if a steer gains fewer than three pounds per day, its owner will lose money. This is not the case with Wagyu. 'We do not cut corners by adding any growth-promoting hormones or animal by-products in our feeding program,' Snake River Farm's Jay Theiler explains. Antibiotics are not given

during the animal's last year either. Instead, Snake River cattle are fed varied 'slow-grow' rations of barley, golden wheat straw, alfalfa hay and Idaho potatoes for about 600 days. 'This is about four times as long as typical cattle are fed,' he says. 'The slow-grow method packs fat on the inside of the muscle – not the outside of the meat as in common commodity beef – to give the beef its extraordinary marbling.'

Health benefits

Australian Dr Tim Crowe, chief dietician with Deakin University's School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, has built a compelling argument for the promotion of Wagyu beef as a 'healthy alternative' in a balanced diet. His statements are based on the unique high concentration of beneficial omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids found in Wagyu beef. While fish are the highest source of omega 3 fatty acids, meat products are another significant source. Omega 3 is known to aid in protection against heart disease, arthritis, depression, Alzheimer's, and high blood pressure, amongst other things.

The unique advantage in Wagyu is that it contains a much higher proportion of the desirable mono-unsaturated fats than other beef. Dr Crowe said the mono-unsaturated/saturated fat ratio was up to three times higher in Wagyu than other beef. Fifty percent of all marbling within a Wagyu carcass was made up of oleic acid (mono-unsaturated), while a relatively small portion was saturated fat.

'But even the saturated fat contained in Wagyu is different. Forty percent of it is in a version called stearic acid, which is regarded as having a minimal impact in raising cholesterol levels. So really, the profile of marbled Wagyu beef is very beneficial to human health. It can be described as a healthier type of meat,' he said.

Whether healthier or not, the sheer price of a piece of Kobe beef might be enough to send you straight to the nearest greasy take-away café. This luxurious piece of meat will cost you almost R1 500/kg – not quite your average meal, but those who know claim that it is worth every cent.



THE BREED

There are four commercial breeds of Wagyu: Japanese Black, Brown, Poll and Shorthorn. In all four breeds the aim is to produce a medium-sized, beef-type animal. All of the breeds are humpless and the bulls tend to develop a marked crest. While the ideal mature body weight and height at the withers differ marginally between the four breeds, the targets for the Japanese Black are typical:

	Male	Female
Body weight (kg)	940	560
Wither height (cm)	142	128

While it is hard to generalise, two traits of the Japanese Black often cited as disadvantageous are their narrow pin bones and their relatively poor milking capacity. The narrow pin bones create calving difficulties if the cows are crossed with bulls of the large-framed European breeds (such as Holstein or Charolais). Poor milking ability increases the costs of raising feeder calves as the calves often need artificial supplements.

Source: www.thewinenews.com,
www.blackmorewagyu.com