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Truly, madly moonstruck

Chefs and diners are paying a fortune for Kobe beef, the marvelously marbled Japanese-style delicacy. But is it worth the price?

By Russ Parsons

Times Staff Writer

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KOBE beef, it seems, is everywhere these days; it's the luxury ingredient of the moment for the tasting menu set. You can get it simple: served raw as a carpaccio at Nine Thirty in Westwood, garnished just with red and green grapes. And you can get it complicated: At the Montage resort's Studio restaurant in Laguna Beach, Kobe short ribs are braised and plated with crisp sweetbreads, royal trumpet mushrooms, a mix of vegetables and a red wine sauce.

After creating a stir in 2002 as part of the now-legendary \$41 burger at New York's Old Homestead Steak House, Kobe hamburgers are now so ubiquitous that they're close to becoming a cliché.

In Las Vegas steakhouses, Kobe beef is so popular that it is creating a shortage of luxury cuts across the country. One restaurant alone sells about 500 pounds a week.

And the prices can be pretty astonishing. At Sterling Steak House in Hollywood, a 22-ounce porterhouse steak for two will run you \$150. At Studio, those stewed short ribs go for a decidedly un-homey \$65. And at Kikuchi in West Hollywood, getting Kobe instead of regular beef can more than double the price of your fixed-price meal — it's a \$40 supplement.

Even if you're willing to cook it yourself, this beef can be dear. At the Allen Brothers website, a pound of filet goes for \$175.95. At Vicente Foods in Brentwood — one of the few places in town that can get Kobe steaks (but with a day or two of notice) — a New York strip runs \$50 a pound.

Of course if you are willing to settle for lesser cuts, you're in for a relative bargain — at least for Kobe. At Mitsuwa markets around Southern California you can find Kobe chuck for about \$15 a pound; Vicente Foods sells frozen Kobe burger patties for \$6.99 a pound.

A quick check of Los Angeles Times restaurant reviews shows that Kobe beef has been mentioned 45 times in the last two years — and only 11 in the two years before that.

What gives? How did Kobe beef become so ubiquitous? Well, the short answer is: because it's not really Kobe beef. In the old days, back before 2002, when you saw it on the menu, there was a good chance it was actually Kobe — the real deal, imported from Japan.

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Made in the USA

TODAY, what is commonly called Kobe beef is really all-American — it comes from American-grown cattle that are crosses of traditional U.S. breeds such as Black Angus and bulls brought from Japan before 2002, when the Department of Agriculture outlawed the importation of Japanese beef, after several incidents of mad cow disease there.

A more accurate name for this beef is *wagyu*, after the Japanese cattle whose bloodlines it shares ("wa" means something like "in the traditional Japanese style" and "gyu" means cow).

At best, calling this beef Kobe is a term of commercial convenience, in the same way that California wines used to be sold as Champagne and Burgundy, and Pacific rock cod is still often labeled red snapper.

At worst, it borders on an outright lie. Both a waitress at Sterling Steak House and Sterling's chef Andrew Pastore claimed their porterhouse was the real thing, imported straight from Japan. When told that if this was true, it was completely illegal. Pastore adopted a Brooklyn wise-guy stance: "I let my suppliers worry about that."

(The next day his publicist clarified that what Pastore really meant was that the meat came from Japanese cows that had been brought to the U.S. to be slaughtered — which would also be illegal.)

Whatever you call it, it can be truly remarkable beef. There's no hype about that.

The first thing you notice about *wagyu* is the marbling, the thin veins of fat running through the muscle. There is so much marbling in a good cut that it makes even Prime meat look lean. In this case, appearances are not deceiving; while Prime beef carcasses average about 8% fat, some *wagyu* goes 20% and even more.

The fat has a different consistency too. It is higher than other beef in mono-unsaturated fatty acids, so it is softer at room temperature and it has a "clean" taste — it doesn't coat your mouth the way most beef fat does.

That chuck steak from Mitsuwa, normally a tough cut that should be braised, was so well-marbled that it grilled up with the slightly chewy texture and deep flavor of a good New York strip.

But it's not just the fat: Even a lean tri-tip from Vicente Market had a buttery texture and an amazing depth of flavor — good *wagyu* tastes like the concentrated essence of beef.

Obviously this meat is not intended to be an everyday thing, but as a very occasional splurge for real beef lovers, it is definitely worth the high price. It is as different from run of the mill beef as a great Burgundy is from Two-Buck Chuck. And because the flavor is so rich, a little bit of it goes a long way.

All *wagyu* is not created equal, though. The perfect steak comes from a combination of good breeding and careful raising, a combination that is far from universal (still, it must be said, while merely average *wagyu* beef may not be worth the exalted price, it is still extremely delicious).

An inferior breeding program can mean cattle that have been cross-bred with American breeds so often that they are only shirrtail cousins of their Japanese forefathers.

Or it can mean herds that were started with inferior cattle to begin with — there are many strains of *wagyu* in Japan, the black Tajima is widely thought to be the best. And even within the strains, there are some bloodlines with more marbling than others.

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Distributing the fat

NURTURE is almost as important as nature. While most American beef is raised to be "efficient" — putting on weight as quickly as possible — part of what makes great *wagyu* beef so well-marbled is a special feeding program based on the standard grain diet but specially tweaked to force the cattle to put on weight more slowly.

This way, the fat is distributed through the muscle rather than just bunched around the outside. Because of this slow rate of growth, *wagyu* cattle fed this way need an extra six months to a year of feeding to get to slaughter weight.

Rather than being graded on the standard American scale of Select, Choice and Prime, *wagyu* is graded on a numerical scale of 1 to 12, based not just on the amount of marbling, but the quality of the fat and meat as well.

While most Prime beef would average about 4 on this scale, most American *wagyu* grades from 6 to 9, and there are even very select *wagyu* (mostly from Australia) that scores from 10 to 12.

The extra amount of time on feed is one reason *wagyu* is more expensive than other beef. Another reason is simply that there is so little of it around. While there are about 11,000 head of Prime cattle slaughtered every week, there are only a couple of hundred *wagyu*.

Snake River Farms, the largest and probably the best American *wagyu* company, started about 15 years ago. It is a subsidiary of Agri Beef Co., the nation's eighth-largest feedlot operator. For the first seven years, it raised beef for the Japanese market, offsetting the transportation costs with the lower cost of growing beef here. As its herd grew, it gradually introduced its product to an American audience.

Today Snake River Farms raises about half of the *wagyu* grown in the United States (it also produces highly rated American Kurobuta pork). At first the company wasn't sure there would be any interest among Americans. Now, says Jay Theiler, its president, the business has quadrupled over the last four years.

Because the business' rate of growth has so far outstripped that of the *wagyu* cattle themselves, the market for the meat is so tight that some chefs who would like to put it on their menus are finding it impossible to get reliable deliveries.

"For certain key cuts, we have a waiting list," says Mike Drury, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Newport Meats, the company that pioneered *wagyu* in Southern California and represents Snake River Farms. "If a customer started with us two or three years ago, obviously we're going to make sure they have it first. If 10 more want it, they'll have to get in line."

If you want to know where all that *wagyu* is going, look northeast. High rollers in Las Vegas are blowing through it like a granny at the nickel slots.

At Craftsteak in the MGM Grand hotel, "We are absolutely selling a ton of [it]," says executive chef Christopher Albrecht. He means that literally:

Albrecht says Craftsteak sells about 500 pounds of *wagyu* a week, a ton a month.

In addition to the regular *wagyu*, Craftsteak is one of only a handful of restaurants in the United States that gets a kind of super-*wagyu* that is raised in Australia by Snake River Ranch, a sister company of Snake River Farms. This is the stuff that scores at the very top of the marbling charts. Look at a piece of this beef and it almost looks like there is more marbling than meat.

You pay for the luxury: This so-called "platinum" beef costs \$20 an ounce with a 4-ounce minimum — twice as much as the same cut from regular *wagyu*.

Besides Craftsteak, this meat is available only at the Montage restaurant in Laguna Beach, the new Yakiniku Toraji in Hawaii and at Thomas Keller's restaurants, the French Laundry in Yountville and Per Se in New York.

"There is some really great Kobe out there, but there isn't as much as it seems," Albrecht says. "There are an awful lot of people who are riding on the coattails of the small amount of good stuff."

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What to look for

HOW do you tell the good stuff from the average? Unfortunately, you'll never be able to find a steak's marbling score. So you're left to pick these pretty much the same way you'd pick any other — by looking at the fat.

It's just that there should be so much more. In a well-marbled Prime steak, you can see flecks of fat through the muscle. In *wagyu*, it looks like there's almost as much fat as there is flesh (remember, though, that what's important is the marbling inside the muscle, not the layer of fat that is wrapped around the outside).

Albrecht also recommends looking for cuts other than the usual "middle meats" from the tenderloin. "Look, a filet is a filet is a filet," he says. "There's just not that much flavor considering what you're paying."

You're much better off selecting a slightly less prestigious cut, such as a rib-eye, tri-tip or even a chuck, at a much lower price.

It's also important to cook the meat at a lower heat than you might for other kinds of beef to prevent too much fat from rendering.

And Albrecht prefers pan-roasting the steak to cooking it on the grill so that you can baste with any fat that renders rather than losing it to the fire.

It goes without saying that you want the meat to be as rare as you can take it (raw *wagyu* makes a wonderful carpaccio).

"It's amazing: so many of our guests order it medium-well and it just kills me," Albrecht says. When that happens, he usually cooks it to medium at most, but then lets it stand so it doesn't look so bloody in the center.

"I'd rather have you send it back than to overcook such a beautiful steak," he says.

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Where to find *wagyu*

Snake River Farms *wagyu* can be found at:

Mitsuwa Market: Mostly these stores carry thin-cut meat intended for shabu-shabu and *yakiniku*-style grilling, but they usually have whole chuck steak, too. 21515 Western Ave., Torrance, (310) 782-0335; 665 Paularino Ave., Costa Mesa, (714) 557-6699; 333 S. Alameda St., Los Angeles, (213) 687-6699;

515 W. Las Tunas Drive, San Gabriel, (626) 457-2899; 3760 Centinela Ave., Los Angeles, (310) 398-2113.

Vicente Foods: This market carries hamburger, tri-tip and flank steak. It can supply other cuts, including steaks, with one to two days notice. 12027 San Vicente Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 472-5215.

The meat is also available at Harvest Ranch Market, 751 Jamacha Road, El Cajon, (619) 442-0355 and 162 S. Rancho Santa Fe Road, Encinitas, (760) 944-6898; and Jensen's Finest Foods, 78525 Highway 111, La Quinta, (760) 777-8181; 73601 Highway 111, Palm Desert, (760) 346-9393; 102 S. Sunrise Way, Palm Springs, (760) 325-8282; and 69900 Frank Sinatra Drive, Rancho Mirage, (760) 770-3355.

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A short history of beef in Japan

THOUGH true Japanese Kobe beef is probably the most prized meat in the world, until relatively recently the Japanese didn't eat much beef at all.

Beef eating in Japan dates only to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Before then, it was culturally taboo in the largely Buddhist country. Even after that, it was rare. Because cattle need lots of land and plentiful feed, neither of which Japan has, the few cattle that were raised were far more valuable as draft animals. It wasn't until the mechanization of rice production began in the 1950s that beef became more commonly eaten. But even today, the average Japanese eats only a little more than 10 pounds of beef a year —roughly 10% of what Americans do.

Beef production in Japan is centered in the Kinki region, which includes the cities of Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe; the last became shorthand for Japanese beef mainly because it was the port from which the meat was exported.

In Japan, the most highly prized beef is Matsuzaka or Omi. Other types, including Kobe, Yonezawa, Tanba, Hida, Saga, Mita and Maezawa, have their fans as well.

Many myths have sprung up about the production of Japanese beef, and some of them are true. The cattle are given regular massages to encourage the distribution of the fat beneath the skin. As for feeding them beer, it's done only in the summer as a way to increase their appetite during hot weather.

— Russ Parsons

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