



THE DISH

Japan's Kobe beef: the story of the world's most expensive meat

Kobe beef is the best in the world, with cattle fetching up to £70,000 each. Lisa Markwell goes behind the scenes of a culinary phenomenon



Beef prepared sushi-style
MARIE TAKAHASHI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

Lisa Markwell | Sunday March 01 2020, 12:01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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A plate is thrust towards me across a counter on the chef's arm. He pulls his other hand towards his face and fixes me with an intense gaze that has been well practised. "Eat and shout," he hollers at me in Japanese — it's the restaurant's signature toast. Um, thanks, I guess. So this is the experience everyone from David Beckham to Ed Sheeran to World Cup rugby players seek out while in Tokyo. It's like nothing I've had before — and vegans and the virtuous look away now, because the plate contains a £140 steak sandwich.



Wagyumafia founder Hisato Hamada with the katsu sando
MARIE TAKAHASHI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE



If you're poised to write in to complain about this ostentatious display being everything that's wrong with the food world today, hold fire. There's a remarkable, often misunderstood backstory to wagyu beef — for that is what's in the sandwich — that takes me far away from the ear-bleed volume rock music and theatrical, flame-roaring grills of the Tokyo restaurant Wagyumafia. It requires what has become known as a “deep dive”. There's a farm in remote Hyogo prefecture, a slaughter house in Himeji, a historic livestock auction in the hills outside Kobe...

First and foremost, I'm here to learn about Kobe beef. Wagyu is a generic term for Japanese beef; Kobe is a very specific beef of the highest quality. It comes from one pure breed of cattle, Tajima, of the Japanese Black variety, that is found only in the Hyogo prefecture. To qualify for Kobe recognition, and an all-important chrysanthemum stamp, it must fulfil strict criteria.



Bidding under way at the 101st Kobe livestock auction
CLERKENWELL BOY

My guide is Hisato Hamada, the charismatic owner of the Wagyumafia restaurants — four in Tokyo, one each in Hong Kong and Manila, and with more in his sights. He and Beckham are drinking buddies, but although he showboats shamelessly with the restaurant's dishes, and swaggers around in a top with “chateaubriand” emblazoned across the back, he is earnest and passionate about the provenance and care of the cattle that end up as beef on plates.

“Kobe is strictly regulated as a geographical region, like the Champagne denomination,” he says as we travel by bus to a remote farm. “This area is the only one for pure-blood breeding, which makes it very high quality.” He explains that elsewhere cattle are cross-bred, which is why you might have seen wagyu beef from Scotland, or in other parts of the world.

Small-scale farming and breeding of these cows, which are traditionally quite compact in size, is a hard life. “Calves that 10 years ago would have cost \$2,300 now cost \$8,000 (£6,178), because of the scarcity of breeders,” Hamada says as we enter the farm, clad in protective suits, shoes and masks (all for the cows' protection, not ours). This life also requires great skill — knowing exactly how much to feed the mothers, with which of the 12 super-steers to breed, at what age to auction the animals and so on. Owners of Tajima cattle can spend \$300 a month on each animal, and have just 100 or so on their land.



Kobe beef is graded from A-C for quality and 1-12 for marbling. This is an A5
MARIE TAKAHASHI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

Are the cows massaged and fed beer, as urban legend would have it? “Not true,” Hamada grins. “But they are washed with Shiseido shampoo before the auction.”

They are regularly combed too, their stalls kept immaculately clean, and there is the faint sound of classical music in the barn.

Each animal has its own record pinned up, with its name and breeding history.

For reasons of health, they are sometimes fed malt waste (hence, perhaps, the beer rumour); grass does not make up a large part of their diet. Pure white fat is one of the indicators of the very best quality meat, and the beta carotene in grass turns it yellow, Hamada explains. “It’s the toughest pedigree to farm,” he adds. “For the best marbling, 60-65% is genetic, the rest is the skill of the farmer. But if you succeed, the meat will be outstanding.”



Chefs (from left) Ekkebus, Lin, Navarra, Carmichael, Parry and Hamada raise a toast
MARIE TAKAHASHI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

Which leads us out of our protective gear and off to the 101st traditional annual Kobe beef auction, a countryside event to which up to 300 farmers bring their best cattle. It’s very rare to see outsiders: I’ve been allowed in, along with five top international chefs, by the Kobe Beef Marketing & Distribution Promotion Association to discover the secrets of this premium product.

In the crowded auction hall, the bidders bellow the familiar *kanpai* toast, although here it’s with cartons of milk (no alcohol). The bidding is fast and furious. A white-gloved lady flips over numbers on a board in a blur, and it’s hard to keep track until the shouting subsides and (quick calculation) that rosetted animal just sold for £70,000.



Wagyumafia chefs present the world's most expensive ramen in "eat and shout" style
SHUNYA KAWAI

The export market is big, with bidders from Harrods, a Las Vegas casino hotel, a Monaco wholesaler. Hamada buys one of the champion cows for a cool £48,000. He's pleased, and that evening we *kanpai* with Suntory highballs.

To be graded as Kobe, the carcass must weigh less than 500kg and its meat must have extremely good marbling — hard to tell when the cow is still walking around. The skill lies as much with the buyer as the farmer. Easier, perhaps, but less romantic is the slaughterhouse auction.

Another day, another protective suit — at the spotless, almost silent Wagyu Master Meat Centre in Himeji city, visitors can see the carcasses up close and personal to examine the meat. Graders have already done the work and the best have the distinctive purple chrysanthemum stamp — as few as 3,000-5,000 cows a year are good enough to be labelled as Kobe.

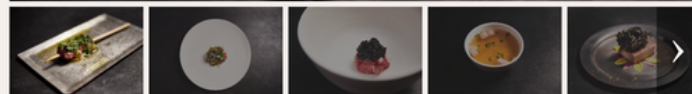


Bidding is done by computer screen, with buyers shielding their button-pressing hand from their neighbours. The colour scheme, the sombre portraits of the 12 “super father” sperm-donor bulls on the wall (these pure-bloods protect the genetic quality of the breed) and the eccentric uniforms give it a real #accidentalWesAnderson feeling.

Via bullet train, we move on to Tokyo and to the end of the journey: the eating. The chefs on this trip with me are Richard Ekkebus of Amber in Hong Kong, Richie Lin from Mume in Taipei, Jordy Navarra of Manila's Toyo Eatery, Paul Carmichael of Momofuku in Sydney and our own Tomos Parry, of Brat in London — Michelin stars abound. They, like me, have been fascinated by the journey of the beef. Unlike me, they will be cooking a fabulous feast at one of the Wagyumafia restaurants using different cuts. We've tried lung, tongue, intestine, hormone and more along the way.

For Hamada it's not just about the prime cuts. The default order for most wagyu fans might be rib-eye steaks, but at Wagyumafia you might get *that* cutlet sandwich, which goes up in price from £35 to £350 depending on whether it's wagyu flank steak or a champion Kobe cut. Or how about a plate of umami-bomb gyoza, jerky or a vast bowl of ramen with char siu beef and a bone-enriched stock? A “snack” of heavily marbled Kobe sushi with sea urchin and caviar on top is something to behold.

Wagyumafia Kobe beef summit chefs' feast



Kobe beef belly in an uchibara negima skewer, green sauce by Tomos Parry, Brat, London [@tomos_pr](#)

SHUNYA KAWAI

The newest Wagyumafia outlet is called Yakinikumafia, where diners can order via a computer screen and stand at their own station to cook (delicious) secondary cuts themselves, with pickles, rice and cheeky bottles of Wagyusco sauces — a snip at about £35. Every part of the animal is used in the company's food — economics and respect for the farming dictate this.

But what does Kobe beef, actually taste like? In its pure form, absurdly soft and with an almost sweet flavour. It's the marbling, which is up to 25% of the cut, as opposed to around 8% in other beef. It is rich in monounsaturated fatty acids, which means it has a lower fat melting point (hence melt in the mouth tenderness), but also lowers bad cholesterol.

Wagyumafia ages its beef to intensify the flavour. It's a carefully calibrated process for meat with such a high fat content, but the results are sublime — for meat eaters. Just ask David Beckham. Hamada, by the way, has vegan Japanese cookery tutorials on his [@wagyumafia](#) Instagram page — no man or woman can live on beef alone, although after a week in Japan, it feels like I just did.

This year, the Olympics will be held in Tokyo, and Wagyumafia can expect to be busier than ever. Just in time, they are opening a “public house” to showcase Hamada’s love of the British pub and whisky — there will be about 1,000 vintage bottles — and a pub menu including, of course, the fabled Kobe katsu sando. A world tour to share the Kobe love is planned throughout 2020. Meanwhile London is, Hamada says, a case of “watch this space”. Get ready to EAT AND SHOUT!

Wagyumafia is hosting a one-night pop-up at Fortnum & Mason, Royal Exchange, London EC3, on Tuesday

GRILLED BELLY OF WAGYU BEEF, NEGI ONION AND MITSUBA GREEN SAUCE

by Tomos Parry, Brat



SHUNYA KAWAI

It was important for me to create a recipe inspired by everything I encountered in Japan, such as the yakitori-style skewers from Tokyo’s “Piss Alley”, beef belly from Wagyumafia and, from Kobe farms, hay and beef. I use fire: Japanese Binchotan charcoal in this case — that’s my main style of cooking at my restaurant, Brat. I’m Welsh, and so love negi (“Welsh onion” in Japanese, a vegetable similar to a leek). Finally, I add an almost European-style sauce of salsa verde but with mitsuba, Japanese parsley.

Serves 5-6 people

INGREDIENTS

- 250g beef belly
- 3 negi onions or leeks

FOR THE SAUCE

- 2 anchovy fillets, finely chopped
- ½ tsp wasabi or Dijon mustard
- 1 tsp capers, finely chopped
- 1 clove of garlic, finely chopped
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 50ml rapeseed oil
- 50ml extra-virgin olive oil
- 75g mitsuba (or parsley)
- 40g mint
- 25g tarragon
- 25g oregano

01 Dice the belly into 2cm cubes (wagyu belly is very different to our British breeds, with a very high fat ratio and able to grill and still be tender).

02 Immerse a negi (or leek) in the warm embers of an open fire and allow the outside to char completely. Remove from the heat and put in a container to allow the centre of the leeks to steam and cook. Once cool, remove the outer skin and cut the inside into 2cm pieces.



03 To make the sauce, put the first four ingredients in a bowl and stir in the vinegar. Gradually add both oils, stirring continuously, then add the finely chopped herbs. Leave for 1 hour, then season to taste.

04 Thread alternating pieces of beef belly and negi onto a skewer. Gently grill over medium heat for 4-5 minutes on both sides. Remove from grill, bathe in the sauce and serve.

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