

Japan's Wagyumafia

Edison Chen on Fame and Influence

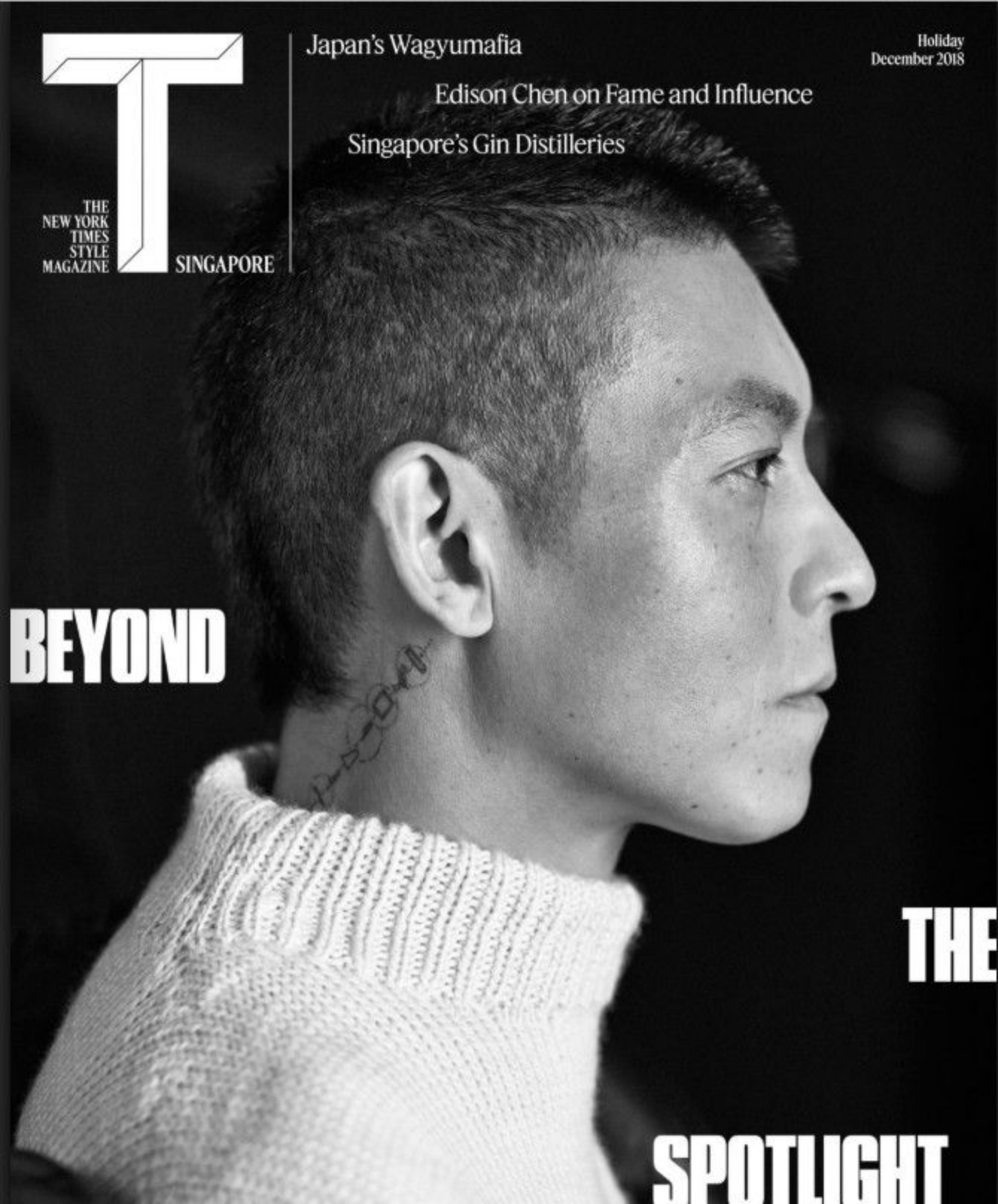
Singapore's Gin Distilleries

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What's the Beef With Wagyu?

Written and photographed
by Patrick Chew

From farm to table, we go behind the scenes to discover the meticulous practices behind Kobe's wagyu industry.

THERE ARE A couple of blindingly obvious truths about Japan that everyone seems to accept without question. First, it is a place that is deeply rooted in tradition, culminating in a culture, which is geared wholly to ideals of respect and honour: how you bow depends on the social status or age of the person you are bowing to, spending decades perfecting the intricate art of slicing a fish is a rite of passage for chefs, and being utterly silent on public transportation is practically mandatory.

Second, Japan is a place of inscrutable efficiency, where apologies and delay certificates are issued when a train arrives just a few minutes late, and food orders and payments are done with vending machines, resulting in higher turnover rates in restaurants.

Japan is a well-oiled clockwork machine, and the Japanese, tireless cogs with incredible rhythm, and, not to mention, style. It is perhaps safe to imply that the Japanese are strong proponents of the age-old adage: if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Enter Hisato Hamada. In 2016, he opened the first Wagyumafia restaurant in Akasaka. Today, the Wagyumafia business includes four restaurants in Tokyo (with a fifth opening in Hong Kong this month, and plans for a sixth in Manila in 2019), a butcher shop, culinary academy, and a distribution network for 20 cattle farms.

The 41-year-old doesn't believe in going with the flow, and looks to continually challenge norms and traditions. For instance, while it is commonly known that kobe beef, with its incredible marbling and intense flavours, hardly needs complicated cooking techniques or recipes to perfect (seasoned with a bit of salt and grilled) Hamada and his team of chefs have experimented with dry-ageing it, something no one has dared as it diminishes the serve-able weight of the precious meat. And if that wasn't enough, Wagyumafia's The Cutlet Sandwich in Shibuya sees its chef, Yasuhiro Inoue, deep-frying kobe chateaubriand and serving it as a sandwich for more than \$300 a plate.

To Hamada, Wagyumafia is so much more than an F&B chain; it is a platform on which he can champion wagyu and elevate the entire industry. So when he invited me for, what he called, "the Wagyumafia experience", I knew it wouldn't be as simple as putting pieces of A5-graded Kobe beef in my mouth—I'd first have to get to know the cows.

ARRIVING AT THE hotel lobby at precisely 6.30am on a chilly October morning, Hamada appeared tense. With international expansion plans for his business, and an upcoming pop-up event in Wagyumafia The Butcher's Kitchen in Minato, with his Mexican business partners, Hamada had a lot on his mind. But that morning, he was only thinking about one thing: buying a cow.

"Not just any cow," Hamada says. "The champion cow."

We were on our way to the 100th Hyogo Prefecture Livestock Competitive Exhibition in Kobe. It is an annual event that sees

Kobe beef sashimi prepared and served by The Wagyumafia Progressive Kaiseki's chef, Satoshi Nagayama.



The 100th Hyogo Prefecture Livestock Exhibition in Kobe that saw over 300 Tajima cattle farmers congregating at the Kobe Fruit & Flower Park to showcase their prized cattle.

over 300 Tajima cattle farmers congregating at the Kobe Fruit & Flower Park to showcase their prized cattle, a result of approximately 36 months of meticulous care and dietary plans to be paraded in front of a panel of judges who then examine, score, and rank them. After, each cow is sold to the highest bidder—usually a distributor, restaurant owner or chef.

It is a highly exclusive event—only farmers, certified bidders and a handful of journalists are allowed. Not everyone can bid on the cattle too—the Hyogo Prefectural Technology Center for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries heavily scrutinises interested parties to determine their credentials and experience before making them certified bidders. On top of all that, all attendees are only allowed entry if they've spent 14 consecutive days in the country.

All these measures are in place to serve one purpose: to protect the cattle. Once in the park, it became apparent to me

that the cows were indeed the kings of the land, and that their safety and well-being took priority above all else. These Tajima pure breeds weighed between 700 to 800 kilograms and were each given an allocated sheltered space with ample water and grain.

It might have something to do with their immense size, or the fact that their hooves were spotless and fur, shiny, but they were unlike any cow I had ever seen. I'm no expert when it comes to reading a cow's expressions, but every one of them actually looked happy, almost smug as they stood on tatami mats while their human masters trudged in dirt and mud, tending to them with brushes and shovels.

To Hamada, however, there was absolutely nothing extraordinary about what I had observed—it was simply the Tajima cattle way of life. "Tajima cows are a national treasure," he says. "We have to make sure they are happy and stress-free, because happy cows give you the best meat."

It was lunchtime and whatever anxiety Hamada was feeling in the morning had all but dissipated. The champion cow had just been announced and Hamada, after having had a long chat with its farmer, was certain he'd be able to procure it.

"So what do you want to know about Tajima beef?" he asks.

After pointing out that there was something rather poignant about learning about Tajima beef over a Tajima beef barbecue that had been set up no more than 20 metres from their live cousins, I asked about the reason behind bidding on a live cow when it is impossible (or so it seems) to properly ascertain the grade of its meat. To me, it didn't seem like good business sense to be paying top dollar (Hamada's eventual winning bid was \$75,000) for something that may not be worth as much.

"It is a way of giving back to the farmers," Hamada explains. "It's a tough trade. The price of calves are increasing and so is the cost of farming. The price of a calf today is between \$10,000

[and] \$13,000, almost double of what it was just five years ago. That's why fewer and fewer people want to rear Tajima cattle."

It is truly a case of the most sought-after product being the most difficult to produce. Of the four strains of wagyu cattle, the Japanese Black is renowned for intense marbling, texture and flavour. And within the Japanese Black breed, the Tajima bloodline (whose pure lineage has been maintained for the past 2,000 years), is known to produce meat with the highest fat marbling percentage and quality. Additionally, they tend to be smaller framed, and have slower growth rates compared to its Shimane and Kedaka counterparts. That said, only pure Tajima-bred, raised, and slaughtered cattle are eligible to be certified as Kobe beef.

THE NEXT DAY, Hamada introduced me to Kyukou Tanaka, one of the cattle farmers he sources his Kobe beef from, and one of



From top: Tajima cattle in Kyukou Tanaka's farm; fat marbling on an A5-graded kobe beef carcass.

only two farmers in Hyogo to win three consecutive championship cow titles at the annual Hyogo Prefecture Livestock Competitive Exhibition. Standing outside his shed (outsiders aren't allowed to come into close contact with the cattle), Tanaka revealed that the secret to raising quality Tajima cattle is in the dedicated attention to detail.

At first glance, Tanaka's shed looks nothing out of the ordinary. On closer inspection, however, I started noticing examples of exactly what Tanaka meant. For instance, Tanaka had installed several large fans on the ceiling of the wooden shed to keep it well-ventilated. There was even soft classical music being played through speakers attached to beams.

"I play classical music because it relaxes me," says Tanaka with a laugh. "But it seems to make the cows relaxed too."

Tanaka's daily routine starts at 5 in the morning when he measures each cow's food intake, determining the right grain formula for each cow that includes up to 15 ingredients — from grass to by-products of Japanese breweries (every cow goes through 10 different phases of feed throughout the course of its life), brushing and massaging them, and, at times, washing them with Shiseido-brand shampoo.

Tanaka's farming philosophy is simple: do everything manually. "The data about a cow's lineage can only tell you about its typical characteristics," Tanaka explains. "Doing everything by hand means that I'm always with the [cow], and that means that I'm able to understand its condition and what it needs."

To him, farmers these days are trying to find ways to make their cattle

'I'm not concerned with raising profitable cows. I'm concerned with raising tasty cows.'

larger, and mature faster. Tanaka's approach, on the other hand, somewhat revolves around the concept of terroir, borrowing winemakers' belief that the geography, geology, climate, and history of any given place will inadvertently

affect the end product.

"I'm not concerned with raising profitable cows," Tanaka says. "I'm concerned with raising tasty cows."

I didn't have to go very far to understand what Tanaka meant. There are corporations in the region that have computerised farming methods, with machines and processes that tend to 6,000-7,000 cows at any given time. Tanaka's is a family-owned farm with no more than 200 cows — a massive testament in the difference in philosophies and objectives.

That, in part, is the reason Hamada has maintained a close working relationship with Tanaka after the pair met six years ago. To him, Tanaka represents the new generation of Tajima and Kobe beef farmers. "He is adaptable and makes use of new technologies when necessary, but at the same, he possesses so much passion and love for his craft," Hamada says.



From top: Kobe and Tajima beef carcasses being examined and graded before being auctioned off; dry-aged kobe beef sandwich prepared and served by Wagyumafia's chef Yesuhiro Inoue.

A COUPLE OF days later, I met Hamada at Wagyumafia The Butcher's Kitchen in Tokyo. The atmosphere was lively, with over 10 people behind the kitchen doing 10 different things such as preparing ramen, slicing a slab of 90-day dry-aged Kobe beef, and Hamada himself, preparing sushi.

"When people think of wagyu, they think of a three-hour dinner in a fine dining restaurant," Hamada says. "I want to make wagyu more accessible and fun."

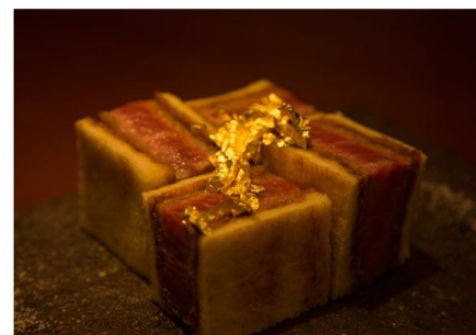
It was the last stop of my Wagyumafia tour after visiting Wagyumafia The Cutlet Sandwich and The Wagyumafia Progressive Kaiseki in Akasaka, where I got to compare the taste of Kobe beef to Miyazaki beef. The latter had a long aftertaste, an umami taste that lingered long after swallowing the meat, while Kobe beef was far more buttery and intense in flavour, yet crisp and clean at the same time.

When I related this to Hamada, he simply smiled, held his hands up and said, "You see, I've done my job. I'm happy you've learned more about wagyu."

That is all Hamada wants with Wagyumafia. For all his theatrics and grand gestures, it is easy to peg him as someone who's all about making as big a statement as possible. After all, you don't read about someone who holds the Guinness World Record for most expensive Kobe cow bought, and not first think that he may be a bit of a show-off.

But Hamada's efforts go to a far humbler goal: to share the story of wagyu with the world.

"At the end of the day, I'm Japanese. I'm proud of my culture,



and I want to showcase the Japanese culture through wagyu," Hamada says.

"If you think about it, wagyu is a reflection of Japanese culture in many ways. Wagyu is bred and produced through a lot of hard work, tradition and passion. And when the world comes to Tokyo for the Olympic [Games] in 2020, I want everyone to see that." ■