

IF YOU LIKE YOUR BEEF RARE

Pampered with massages and beer, Wagyu cattle produce the incomparable Kobe beef. David Wynne Finch is the first British breeder of this extraordinary breed, but can they save his North Wales family farm? SIMON DAVIS reports.

AN attractive young London couple take over a sprawling estate in deepest Wales and dutifully leave their cosmopolitan life to head out west. With pioneering zeal, he becomes the first person in Britain to breed rare Japanese cattle that he massages and feeds beer to produce the most delectable beef in the world, costing £50 odd for a steak. An ailing Welsh estate becomes the Château Rothschild of beef. It is a story that even the most adventurous Hollywood producer would shy away from, yet it is very real.

David Wynne Finch, a 31-year-old Cirencester graduate, always knew the time would come when responsibility for the larger of his family's two far-flung Welsh estates would fall upon him. In 2000, it did.

The prospect of leaving behind friends and careers in London to run a remote estate with a struggling farm was daunting for Mr Wynne Finch and his wife, Henrietta, 30. Much of his 13,000 acres skirting Snowdonia National Park is beautiful, but also inaccessible and not ideal for farming. 'I needed to diversify and make some money,' he explains, sitting in the cavernous Welsh kitchen that could accommodate his London flat. The Wynne Finch family have a long history in the area. 'I had a responsibility to myself, my family and to future generations.

'I wanted to keep farming, but I couldn't think what to do,' says Mr Wynne Finch, who has previously worked for a Dutch company, Agro-Industrial, in Chile and Argentina, and had traded grain and oil seed in London. Then he met Wim Claessen while researching Wagyu genetics, and learned more about the rare Japanese cattle that produce the celebrated Kobe beef.

Most will never have heard of Kobe beef and fewer will have tasted it. I have once, at Matsuhisa, the legendary Beverly Hills restaurant. It was seared, thinly sliced

and fearsomely expensive: imagine you have always eaten tinned strawberries and someone gives you a fresh one. Kobe is the beef equivalent of that.

Four farms were immediately let to local farmers, with 1300 acres, and sheep and cattle were sold. 'We needed to concentrate on beef,' Mr Wynne Finch says.

Cefnamwlch, in Tudweiliog, one of family's homes, sits on the Lleyn Peninsula. Foelas, the house designed by Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, which the couple have taken over, with 13,000 acres, is 50 winding miles away. The groundbreaking Kobe breeding programme, christened Château Wagyu, takes place at Tudweiliog, but will ultimately include Foelas.

Driving towards Tudweiliog, one is immediately struck

by pastures of remarkably lush grass. 'This is part of a new style of farming I'm developing,' Mr Wynne Finch says. The by-words for cattle feed are convenience and cheapness, yet he has set aside 50 acres for traditional grasses that are native to Britain, but have been sidelined for years in favour of higher-yielding varieties. 'They are organic, more fibrous and superior—the best grasses for feed.'

'Wagyu have to be pure bred,' says Mr Wynne Finch, explaining that Wagyu is the breed and Kobe is the area of Japan where they originate. 'Wa' means Japanese and 'gyu' means cow. 'You must have the right breeding lines and feed the cattle properly, otherwise you'll not get the right results and cannot call it Kobe,' he says.

To breed his first bull, Mr Wynne Finch imported pure-bred Wagyu embryos from America, which were hosted in virgin Welsh Black heifers. There are now six Wagyu heifers and 19 calves and slaughtering will start this year. Initially, sales will be by mail order in smart boxes embossed with the rather grand Château Wagyu logo.

The beasts are handsome and fit but not wildly different. So what makes the



Château Wagyu's grand logo for Kobe beef



Wagyu cattle do not look terribly special, but a high percentage of saturated fats gives the meat a unique flavour

Wagyu so special? Just as the pigs that produce the sublime Parma ham have a higher percentage of unsaturated fats, so do Wagyu. This melts at a lower temperature, is less dense and richer, giving the meat its uniquely wonderful flavour, and good cuts are as prized as the finest truffles, caviar and foie gras. It costs £50 a kilo wholesale. Boned out, each beast will yield about 170 kilos, compared with more than 200 kilos in regular breeds. Each animal is worth about £8,500, but beasts with excellent pedigree can fetch considerably more.

One of the great traditions of Wagyu breeding involves their lifestyle. In Japan, the cows are fed on beer and, in the months leading up to slaughter, they are pummelled daily by trained masseurs, which helps to increase circulation and break down and spread any fatty tissues, enhancing the quality of the meat. Gently corralling one of his heifers into a gate, Mr Wynne Finch gives a massage demonstration. The privileged beasts are also housed in grand living quarters that resemble Château Lafite, hence the idea for Château Wagyu.

There have been raised eyebrows among the remote Welsh farming community at



David Wynne Finch massages one of his Wagyu cattle, a practice said to enhance quality of the meat



the idea that, from now on, the cows will be having a massage and the odd pint. However, Mr Wynne Finch's clear passion for Wales and his commitment to boost the beef industry is warmly embraced.

Emlyn Williams, farm manager at Tudweiliog for 28 years, says he initially found the Kobe idea bizarre. 'Now I can see what it's all about, I think it is champion and I'm privileged to be involved,' he says.

WHAT IS KOBE BEEF?

WHAT IS IT?

A legendary delicacy that comes from the Japanese Wagyu breed of cattle with a herd registry book dating from 1830. Wagyu is the breed and Kobe is the area. 'Wa' mean Japan and 'gyu' means cow. Wagyu are derived from native Asian cattle, which were crossed with British and European breeds in the late 1800s. They were originally draught animals. The Japanese did not eat beef until after the Second World War. When they did, they slaughtered their draught animals and discovered the meat tasted outstanding, because the cows were so fit and had small intermuscular fat cells, which is the key to tender meat

SO WHAT?

It is the finest beef money can buy. Sailors who visited Japan early in the last century returned with tales of tasting 'the greatest meat on God's earth'

WHY?

It has an extremely high, yet gossamer-fine, oleaginous fat content or 'marbling'. The effect is an intensely rich flavour. Because of centuries of selective breeding, the finest cuts have the consistency of foie gras

DOES ALL THE FAT MAKE IT UNHEALTHY?

No. Fat gives meat its flavour. Wagyu produce unsaturated fats—the healthiest form—to a much greater degree than any other beef. (65–70% compared with 48–52% in British cattle)

PRICEY?

Obscenely so (or reassuringly so, depending on where you stand). The supreme cuts from the best bloodlines such as Shabu-Shabu can cost £200 a pound. Individual carcasses in Japan (about 1,000lb) can go for £15,000. Currently, in a Las Vegas restaurant, a Wagyu steak will cost \$160 (around £100)

ARE THEY BRED ONLY IN JAPAN?

Initially, yes. Once the Japanese realised their draught animals produced such astounding meat, they decreed it a National Treasure

and banned its export. However, in 1976 two Tottori Black and two Kumamoto Red bulls were 'mysteriously' exported to America. There is now a comprehensive breeding programme in the US. Five more beasts were exported in 1993, amid great controversy

HOW CAN IT STILL BE CALLED KOBE, THEN?

Because the cattle is pure-bred. Kobe beef designation can legally be applied to the meat from any cattle of the Wagyu breed

WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE TASTE?

Quite incomparable. Velvety, sublime, sweet and supple. More vegetarians have converted back to eating meat because of Kobe beef than any other meat

APPARENTLY THEY ARE MASSAGED AND FED BEER?

This is not a rural myth. Wagyu in Kobe often live in grand châteaux-like buildings and are nourished with a diet of highly expensive feed, including Sapporo lager, which is used largely to stimulate appetite. Professionally trained masseurs work on the cattle every day in the months before slaughter to disperse any fatty tissue, relieve stiffness from lack of exercise and tenderise the meat. Sake is also rubbed into the coat

HOW DO I GET SOME IN BRITAIN?

This is difficult at the moment. Certain London restaurants do occasionally have it, such as Nobu and the St Martin's Lane Hotel. Château Wagyu hopes to remedy its scarcity

HOW DO I COOK IT?

With great care. Its physical properties are not remotely the same as normal beef, and it requires great care and guidance to avoid ruining. Searing on a pre-heated iron skillet is best. Eating it raw as sashimi is popular. It is served with soy sauce, Daishi broth and green onion. It is not for a Sunday roast

Further details can be found on: www.wagyu.net