

World's best cattle find a welcome in the hillsides

by Burhan Wazir

A HERD of cows grazes on the Lleyn Peninsula, an area of north Wales renowned for its Iron Age hill forts and Neolithic tombs. The scene is idyllic, typical of this part of Britain, littered as it is with dairy farms. But there is nothing typical about this farm, or these cattle. For the animals come from Japan, and this farm is the home of an ambitious British attempt to stake a claim to the finest meat in the world.

Now that meat from the Wagyu breed of cattle is tempting New Yorkers to pay up to \$41 (£26) for a burger, a Welsh farmer is attempting to introduce the meat here.

'I have always wanted to supply the best meat in the world,' said David Wynne Finch. 'I think this is pretty close. I think this is the best herd in the world.'

Wagyu cattle – chocolate brown, with slender features – are among the most expensive and most pampered in the world. Embryos were imported two years ago from Kobe, Japan, where the breed originated, and implanted in cows. Now, across 800 acres of rolling lush pasture in Wales, Finch, whose family has been farming for 500 years, has built the cattle a habitat that caters to their every need.

They are raised on a special diet, including grain and beer, to give the meat, which is

highly marbled, its distinctive flavour and rich texture.

According to Finch, no expense is spared to maintain their wellbeing. The herd is even massaged with sake.

Wagyu meat, also known as Kobe beef, has taken the US by storm, with New Yorkers queuing for Wagyu burgers.

One restaurant, the Old Homestead in Manhattan, sells up to 200 a day at \$41 each. The burger, a 20-ounce monster almost double the size of most restaurant steaks, arrives with herb butter in

the middle of each patty and is served on a regular roll with mushrooms. Garlic-flavoured fries complete the bumper-calorie meal, with home-made ketchup, horseradish and stone-grain champagne mustard on the side. The dish is usually washed down with Cabernet Sauvignon instead of cola.

Finch, formerly a banker in South America, returned to the family farm two years ago. 'I'd read a book about cows of the world and I was determined to get back into

farming. These are about the finest cows in the world. In Japan, cows can often sell for tens of thousands of dollars. When you are paying that much money, it is important to look after the animals. Everything you invest in their diet comes back in the standard of meat they give.'

While Wagyu meat is still to go on general sale in the UK, Finch predicts that by the end of the year, it will be available throughout the country. He hopes to sell to up-market restaurants and hotels.

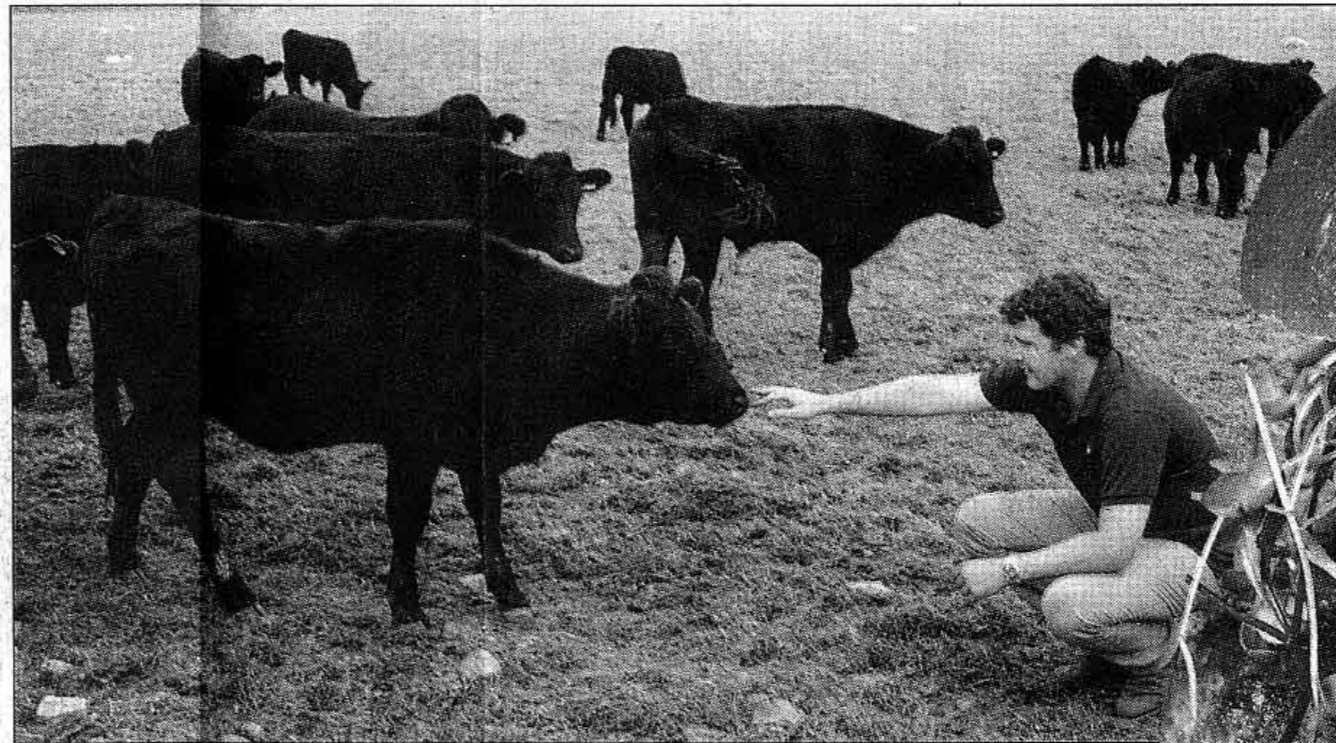
'While I am happy New Yorkers have taken to it, I'd rather it was not being used merely for burgers,' he said. 'That's not my intention. Ideally, I'd like it to be served as a steak, prepared by a chef. Or used to create something that wasn't associated with junk food. When I get round to offering it in the UK, it will be important that I am able to pick up clients that are creative with the meat.'

Not all food analysts are convinced, however.

'A 20-ounce burger doesn't

have any obvious health benefits,' said a bemused Sarah Schenker, a nutritionist with the British Nutrition Foundation. 'As part of a healthy diet, it might not do too much harm. But, while we advise

people to eat burgers once a week at the very most, a 20-ounce burger should only be consumed on very, very special occasions. If you had one every day, it would be as filling as a Christmas meal.'



David Wynne Finch with his herd of Wagyu. Massages with sake help keep their spirits up. Right, the 'Kobe', the world's dearest burger, made from Wagyu meat. Photographs by Andrew Spooner and John Chapple

