



The Rosengarten Report

THE FOODS AND WINES THAT MAKE ME SWOON

THIS MONTH'S TASTING SCOOP

KOBE ... OR NOT KOBE?

The Myths ... The Lies ... The Udder Confusion ... and the Delicious Opportunities Right Now for Savvy Steak-Lovers in the U.S.!

One of the most sizzling buzz words to come down the culinary pike in many a year is “Kobe.” You can’t go far these days, restaurant or butcher shop, without hearing such things as “We have a special tonight, a 3-ounce Kobe filet mignon, for only \$150,”

or “I can trim this great Kobe strip steak for you, only \$47 a lb.” And many of us, it seems, are saying “yes, yes”—thinking that Kobe beef from Japan is the world’s greatest beef, the carnal *ne plus ultra*, worth any price.

There’s only one problem. What many of us don’t realize is that there is no Kobe beef in the U.S. right now. None. Not a *mignon* of it. Real Kobe beef is illegal in the U.S.

Worse: Some restaurants and butcher shops are serving and selling beef they call Kobe (because the name is hot), knowing that the designation is a lie. And most of what they’re serving tastes little like Kobe beef from Japan. I undertook this research project and story because I don’t want you to be fooled.

However, there is a bright side. An extremely bright side. As my month-long immersion in the subject indicated, there are fantastic cuts of beef out there in the U.S., now marketed with the Kobe glory (stated or implied), that truly are worth their price tags—and these tags can show prices that are surprisingly close to the prices of “regular” beef.

This is a major revelation to me, and has changed my beef-

buying life. But to take advantage of it all, first you have to understand what’s going on.

Let’s start with the definition of Kobe beef. Kobe, technically, is not a type of beef. Kobe is a city in southwestern Japan, in the prefecture of Hyogo, with a long tradition of raising excellent beef in a special way—famously involving, the story

goes, a diet of beer, and regular sake massage for the cattle. It is true that officially-approved beef coming from Kobe, Japan is called Kobe beef. However, connoisseurs in Japan know that not all beef coming from Kobe gets the royal treatment, or is of top quality; production today, in fact, has been expanded beyond the prefecture, and many steers that are officially “Kobe beef” are raised in other countries before being shipped to producers in Kobe for finishing! Furthermore, the reputation of Kobe beef in Japan is superseded by the reputations of beef produced in other places: Omi beef in the Shiga prefecture, Matsuzaka beef in the Mie prefecture, and Mishima beef in the Shizuoka prefecture, for example. But it is the name “Kobe” that has captured the American imagination—perhaps

because it’s easy to say, and easy to remember.

Once upon a time—like four years ago—beef from Kobe, Japan was available in the U.S. I remember eating it deliriously in the late 1990s at New York steakhouses, price be damned. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing and tasting—beef that, when raw, was so intensely marbled with fat it looked like it had been gang-injected with cream cheese. And the

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

DESPERATE HOUSE WINES!

Hot Choices for Summer 2005

COPENHAGEN DISCOVERY:

Wonderful, Wonderful Lunch!

YOU, ME AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

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ALL THE SWEETNESS OF SICILY

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mouth feel was literally unbelievable: this stuff didn't metaphorically melt in your mouth, it literally melted in your mouth, accompanied by wonderful waves of sweet beef and butter flavor.

Then the trade wars struck—or, officially, the regulatory implications of Mad Cow Paranoia. The U.S. banned the importation of beef from Japan in 2001, putatively because of a case of Mad Cow in Japan; Japan reciprocated by banning the importation of U.S. beef into Japan in 2003, after a case of Mad Cow turned up in the U.S. (albeit from a Canadian-born animal). Those of us in America who had come to love the unique taste and texture of Kobe beef—unless we had lots of frequent-flyer miles—were suddenly out of luck in 2001.

Or were we?

As far back as the 1970s, American producers started thinking about creating an American-raised equivalent of Kobe beef—a product not subject to the vicissitudes of international trade. The idea was simple: bring into the U.S. a few bulls of the breed used for Kobe, or import some of their semen—and start inseminating those American cows!

First step: identify the breed—which was simple and complicated at the same time. “Simple”—because there is one modern breed in Japan that is called “Wagyu” (which literally means “Japanese Cow”) which everyone agrees is the best breed for this high-end type of beef. How complicated can this be—Kobe beef is produced from Wagyu steers! But it gets complicated because there are four commercial breeds of Wagyu—Black Wagyu, Brown Wagyu, Poll Wagyu and Shorthorn Wagyu—and, worse, each breed has various strains!

OK. Let's choose to avoid that sub-breed, sub-strain morass. We'll leave that to livestock taxonomists. Here's the important thing you need to know: if you see the word “Wagyu” (pronounced WAG-yoo) used in connection with beef or steak, you are being told that the beef is produced from the cattle breed used in Japan to produce Kobe beef. So “Wagyu” is the key word to look for. There are now a number of American producers of Wagyu beef, whose stocks of cattle began life with either Wagyu bulls brought into the U.S. as progenitors, or Wagyu semen brought into the U.S.

Clear? American Wagyu legal, Japanese Kobe illegal, both produced from Wagyu, the same breed of cattle. Yes, clear so far. But take a deep breath, and get ready for a bare-back ride on a bull. Lots of bull.

First of all, when you go to a high-end restaurant, you will often see the beef on a menu these days described as “Kobe.” What's up wit dat? Can restaurants legally procure Kobe beef? No. Importing beef from Japan is illegal for them

as well. But they can write “Kobe” with impunity on their menus, if they wish—for, believe it or not, there's no law against calling beef “Kobe” in a restaurant!

Secondly—you will even see the name “Kobe” on packages of American-raised Wagyu beef that you buy. Why? Sometimes it's just brazen flouting of the law. Other times it's because producers apply to the government for permission to use the word “Kobe” in the names of their beef products. So if I petition the USDA to produce something called “Kobe-Style American Wagyu Beef,” for example, I may well be given the green light.

Bigger problems ahead. Is American Wagyu Wagyu? Probably yes. But the percentages of true Wagyu parentage vary wildly in American-raised Wagyu beef. American producers feel that Wagyu cows (the moms) are not the best producers of Wagyu beef (for various commercial reasons)—and, therefore, have, since the 1970s, typically crossed the Wagyu males with females of other breeds (often, Black Angus). The result is that there are not many 100% Wagyu steers in the U.S. today being sold as beef, a lot of Wagyu that's only 50% Wagyu or so, and,

as far as we can determine, there are cattle that are even less Wagyu than that! It is totally legal to market American-raised beef called “Wagyu” in the U.S.—but when you buy it at the store, there will be no percentages on the label whatsoever! Furthermore—much further, really—there is no enforceable USDA minimum for the percentage of Wagyu in the Wagyu beef that comes to the market. There is a maze of paperwork for producers to fill out when they're applying to the government for the Wagyu label—but, basically, the government is not keeping tabs on any of the beef that finally gets sold. Holy cow!

My friends, it gets even murkier, if you're obsessed with the search for Wagyu quality.

Let's say you've identified a source for 75% Wagyu-parentage beef, and another for 50% Wagyu-parentage beef. The former's better, right? More Wagyu in the genes? Not necessarily! Why? Get this. In 1976, four Wagyu bulls were imported into the U.S. to begin the breeding of American Wagyu. In the 1990s, over 200 Wagyu bulls and cows came into the U.S. for the same purpose. Insiders say that the 1990s group “had better genetics”—meaning that 50%-Wagyu with 1990s parentage may be better-tasting than 75%-Wagyu with 1970s parentage! *Oy vey!*

How about the raising and the feeding? Another source of confusion. All of the Wagyu ranches, in the U.S., use their own types of feed, and their own techniques. So that introduces still more variables into the equation. One thing is certain: no one in the U.S. is feeding with beer, and massaging with sake . . . or massaging at all. Why? American ranchers say that all this beer-and-massage stuff is just a romantic smokescreen. First of all, it is hardly done at all even in Japan any longer. Secondly, the beer diet, I was told, was introduced only to get the animals hungrier for their real feed, grain, not to fatten them up with beer. Lastly, I was also told that the massage has nothing to do with beef quality—only with the improved look of the animal's coat, which helps bring a higher price when the ani-

Waves of sweet beef and butter flavor . . .

CHANGE IN THE TRADE WINDS?

Industry scuttlebutt: next month, July, 2005, American and Japanese officials are going to “review” the mutual bans on each others' beef. Word is that they will try to lift the bans, ultimately—which means that actual Kobe beef from Japan may once again be crossing our borders. Stay tuned! I will keep you up to date.

THE BYZANTINE WORLD OF KOBE/WAGYU GRADING

There's something about Wagyu beef that inspires people to start creating evaluation scales. In Japan, there are at least six scales that are traditionally used to judge beef, including the famous 1-12 scale for degree of marbling. The system is less formalized in the U.S., with many producers creating their own internal scales to express the level of quality in their Wagyu beef. It has become so confusing in the U.S., that I have chosen not to burden you with all the different systems. Just keep in mind that when you talk to the Wagyu people—they're gonna start telling you about their scales!

mal is displayed and sold. Supposedly, rubbing the animal with sake gives it the most luminous sheen of all. So . . . keep in mind . . . when you buy your “Kobe-Style American Wagyu Beef” . . . it has nothing whatsoever to do with those quaint myths that you've heard about Kobe feeding and handling!

Now . . . to make matters even muddier . . . the “structure” of the business in the U.S. is wildly confusing. There are ranches that produce Wagyu beef, then ship it and distribute it. There are some ranches that sell directly to consumers, and others that don't. There are ranches that produce the beef, then let others ship it and distribute it. There are ranches that raise the beef, then send it off elsewhere to be “finished.” There are distributors who have nothing to do with the beef other than distributing it. There are distributors who age the beef themselves before distributing it. There are butchers who receive the meat and sell it, doing nothing to it. There are butchers who age the meat themselves before selling it. There are countless permutations that make my head spin.

It is sometimes very hard to understand the chain that led to the Wagyu beef in your hands—but, at these prices, understanding that chain is so very important!

So here's what I did, taking all of this confusion into account: I set out to set the record straight, at least for the consumer. My researchers got on the phone with as many people in the Wagyu/Kobe world as they could, and took in a vast deal of information (much of it, of course, contradictory!) Then, after figuring out all of the places that are shipping Wagyu beef to American consumers—we started ordering!—leading to an astonishingly huge tasting of American Wagyu beef that went on at our office for a month.

More on the providers and the specific winners later. For now, here are the six most important things I learned about Wagyu beef—the key things you need to know as a consumer:

Key Wagyu Observation #1: If you've had Kobe beef from Japan, or have had it described to you—in other words, if you're looking for that melt-down, soft as butter, cream-cheese injection factor—you will almost always be disappointed in the American Wagyu that you order for home consumption. The vast preponderance of what we ordered and tasted did not have this quality. Why? Two theories. First, I've come to believe that beef from American Wagyu does not develop the same insane marbling that the best Japanese beef does. Secondly—though I cannot positively verify this thought—I have the feeling that many producers and purveyors of American Wagyu send their very fattiest cuts to high-end restaurants. As you can

imagine, any purveyor has all kinds of quality levels on hand to sell (having so many different specific animals to choose from!). Frankly, I don't think the consumer gets the cream-cheesiest choices; I had some beef at Tom Keller's Per Se in New York last year that was, without a doubt, cream-cheesier than anything we had in this tasting.

Key Wagyu Observation #2: Get over it! I mean it. And no, I'm not espousing some Stoic view of life here. There are many people who taste Kobe beef at its cream-cheesiest—and begin to gag! It's true: for some, full-fat Kobe is so fatty it's just not pleasant to eat. And even those who like that quality—I'd be counted in that camp—find it difficult to consume more than a few ounces of the stuff. So along comes American Wagyu—beef that, at its best, is wonderfully buttery and silky, just not as crazy-buttery as Kobe. Is that such a bad thing? Well, it is at over \$100 a lb. retail. But . . . and this is the big but . . . if you can find Wagyu at decent prices, it is absolutely, positively worth adding to your gastronomic life.

Key Wagyu Observation #3: The greatest excitement for me was not in the most expensive cuts of American Wagyu . . . but in those cuts of beef that I didn't expect to be impressive! With just a few exceptions, the hyper-expensive short loin cuts I tasted—the strip steaks, as well as the beef tenderloins (or filet mignons)—were only a little ways above the un-Wagyu strip steaks and un-Wagyu filet mignons that I buy from the best butchers. But those sirloins! And those tri-tips! And a host of other relatively inexpensive cuts! These are cuts of beef that I almost never buy anymore, having been disappointed so many times. But when these cuts come from Wagyu steer, you can really, really see a huge difference; the extra fat that the breed develops is precisely what these cuts need to go over the top and become wonderful. Are they wonderful like the cream-cheese-Kobe steaks of Japan? No. Not that kind of wonderful. But they are absolutely wonderful nevertheless, and fully worth your attention.

Key Wagyu Observation #4: Let's take this one crazy step further: in a few cases, the “lesser,” less expensive cuts . . . came closer to the buttery-fatty Kobe thang than the hyper-expensive cuts did! I'm thinking of short ribs in particular: see all the details on p. 11.

Key Wagyu Observation #5: How you cook your Wagyu has a lot to do with your impression of its Kobe-ness. The most important thing is: if you want to emphasize its buttery, velvety texture, DO NOT OVERCOOK IT! This, of course, is intuitive to most cooks. But here's the surprising addendum: DO NOT UNDERCOOK IT, EITHER! In my house, ever-hoping to preserve the sashimi-like shimmer of great red meat, I usually give meat a great scorch on the outside—preferably over very hot charcoal—leaving it stone-cold rare on the inside.

Uh-uh. Not with Wagyu. Keep the charcoal, of course. But if you cook it “black-and-blue,” or merely to cold-rare, you will not bring to life the buttery fat in the meat. It just kind of sits there like cold butter. But if you cook the meat to *warm-rare*—you will see a big difference. Fat will flow, butter will burst on your palate, providing many more textural thrills. It’s not a big window of opportunity, I’m afraid—but you must devote all your cooking efforts to squeezing through it. PLEASE NOTE: It is almost impossible, if you want a warm-rare Wagyu center, with good exterior crust, to cook a thin Wagyu steak properly! Unfortunately, some producers, purveyors and butchers automatically send you thin steaks when you order! Try to avoid those steaks. If you have your choice when ordering a premium cut of Wagyu (like ribeye, or strip, or filet mignon)—always choose steaks that are at least an inch-and-a-half thick!

Key Wagyu Observation #6: Speaking of cooking—despite the fact that quick-cooked, rare Wagyu has all the glamor, you should most certainly not overlook those Wagyu cuts intended for long cooking! Some of the most profound and exciting bites of all in this tasting came from Wagyu briskets and Wagyu short ribs, both cooked in the vicinity of five hours!

All righty. Now you’re ready to think about sources from which you can order your American Wagyu. It’s actually not a huge field of major players, though it is a confusing one. So I have compiled a list of everyone that I think may be of some importance to you—including producers, purveyors and butchers. Here are the criteria I used for inclusion in this list, as well as a few thoughts about each type of player:

PRODUCERS. There are fewer than a dozen ranches in the U.S. producing the Wagyu beef that’s likely to end up on your table. There are more ranches, of course, smaller ranches—but their production is for very local use, or even for personal use. In this list, you will find, I hope, all of the primary producers that you’ll come across in ordering American Wagyu beef. Some of them will ship to you directly; to obtain the meat of the others, you must go through a purveyor or a butcher.

PURVEYORS. There are now many purveyors of Wagyu beef in the U.S. This is a necessary link in the chain, since some ranches don’t ship to retail customers. If we were not able to obtain the meat directly from a certain ranch for our tasting, we sought out the purveyor that could most easily provide that meat to us. In some cases, I’ve included both a ranch that ships *and* a purveyor—but only if that purveyor does something extra to the meat (like aging it) that makes it different from what the ranch would send.

BUTCHERS. There are now butchers everywhere in the U.S. selling Wagyu beef—and much of it is exactly what you can already obtain by mail order from the ranch. Check carefully to see what’s going to cost you more money: the ranch’s shipping costs, or the butcher’s mark-up. Please note, however: some butchers do age the meat, so what they’re selling you is different from what the ranch will ship. On this list, then, we have focused on 1) those Wagyu-aging butchers, or 2) on the butchers who provide Wagyu beef that neither ranch

nor purveyor does. There are some excellent butcher shops across the U.S. selling Wagyu—but if the Wagyu you can get is exactly what you can get in other ways, the butcher shop is not on this list.

THE BIG LIST

ALL OF THE MAJOR PLAYERS (RANCHES, PURVEYORS, BUTCHERS) IN THE AMERICAN WAGYU GAME

The players are listed in alphabetical order . . . with stars, on a scale of 5, indicating to you my relative excitement. At the end of each entry—if the player sells to retail customers—I will give you a general description of the prices you can expect to pay when you buy from this outfit.



ALLEN BROTHERS/*Purveyor*

3737 South Halsted St., Chicago, IL 60609

773.890.5100 (tel)

800.957.0111 (toll-free)

800.890.9146 (toll-free fax)

www.allenbrothers.com

Since 2003, Allen Brothers has been a purveyor of Wagyu beef from an important ranch in Texas called Yama Beef. As you’ll see in the Yama Beef entry (p. 8), Yama Beef itself does ship to retail consumers. But the meat they send to Allen Brothers, we were told by Yama Beef, is considered the highest quality beef that Yama Beef produces (it receives an internal grade of “Triple A+,” having been fed for more than 550 days leading to the highest amount of marbling). Upon receiving this beef from Yama Beef, Allen Brothers ages it on-site for a further 5–8 weeks. We tested some Allen Brothers cuts of Yama Beef against the same cuts from Yama Beef itself—and, indeed, with one exception, preferred what Allen Brothers sent us. In fact, Allen Brothers is shipping some of the very best Wagyu of all in the U.S.

It’s not surprising. Allen Brothers, established in Chicago in 1893, and now one of the country’s largest suppliers of USDA prime beef to restaurants, is a big favorite around this office, having scored highly in many meat trials over the last four years.

Prices to retail customers: among the highest.



ARROWHEAD GAME MEATS/*Purveyor*

P.O. Box 439, Kearney, MO 64060

816.628.2099 (tel)

816.370.6328 (to order)

816.628.2929 (fax)

www.gamemeat.com

Arrowhead Game Meats is a Missouri-based re-seller of game products to food service accounts, as well as to retail consumers. It was founded in April, 2000, by husband and wife, John and Elaine Telge. In 2002, they paired up with Kobe Beef America (KBA), one of the most important American producers of Wagyu beef (see p.6)—but one that doesn't sell directly to retail customers—and Arrowhead is now one of KBA's principal re-sellers to retail customers and food service.

Arrowhead receives Wagyu beef from KBA 1–2 weeks after it is processed. They then wet-age the beef (not as good as dry-aging, in my opinion) for 21–35 days. Once aged, the meat is sent to Paradise Locker Meats, a processing plant, for “consumer repackaging” (cutting the carcass into smaller cuts for consumer consumption). Consumers receive the beef either fresh or frozen, depending on the cut. (Arrowhead freezes those cuts that are less often requested by customers; tri-tip, for example is usually shipped frozen).

The quality of Arrowhead's KBA meats was quite high, particularly in the texture department. For a comparison, also read about the KBA meats from exoticmeats.com on this page.

Prices to retail customers: very reasonable.



D'ARTAGNAN/Purveyor

280 Wilson Ave., Newark, NJ 07105

800.327.8246 (toll-free)

973.465.1870 (fax)

www.dartagnan.com

D'Artagnan needs no introduction in these pages. Founded in 1985 by Ariane Daguin and George Faison, the company has been at the forefront of the push towards quality products in America over the last 20 years. They are often associated with foie gras in people's minds, but D'Artagnan currently provides a range of over 300 items (including lots of game, poultry, charcuterie, sausages, smoked delicacies, etc.) to the world's top restaurants, hotels, retailers, cruise ships and airlines. Not to mention to retail consumers at home who simply dial the toll-free number!

D'Artagnan is new to the Wagyu game; they began selling it at the beginning of 2004. Their Wagyu beef comes from Strube Ranch in Texas (see p. 7), which does not ship to retail consumers. Before Strube sends beef to D'Artagnan, they wet-age it at the ranch for ten days to two weeks. D'Artagnan ships their Strube-produced Wagyu beef fresh (except for the ground beef, which is frozen), nationwide, using next-day service. D'Artagnan says that more kinds of cuts are available to their food-service clients than to their retail customers, but that retail customers can get the highest-grade meat they sell.

I always love D'Artagnan's reliability, and the great condition of their products. Somehow, however—with the exception of the ground beef from Strube—their Wagyu selections are not the most exciting available. (See Lobel's on p. 6 for another Strube purveyor). Let's give D'Artagnan a little time to get it right.

Prices to retail customers: moderate.



exoticmeats.com/Purveyor

2245 148th Ave. NE, Bellevue, WA 98007

425.641.1069 (tel)

800.680.4375 (toll-free)

425.641.3649 (fax)

www.exoticmeats.com

This company is the mail-order branch of Seattle's Finest Exotic Meats, a retail and wholesale outfit, begun by Russ McCurdy in 1990, that distributes exotic meats from the U.S. and New Zealand. In 2002 they got into the Wagyu game, when they began to sell Wagyu that comes exclusively from the producer KBA (see p. 6). Unlike Arrowhead, an alternate purveyor of KBA beef (see p. 4) that wet-ages the Wagyu they receive from KBA, exoticmeats.com receives beef from KBA that has already been wet-aged for 21 days. No further aging takes place. In our tasting, exoticmeats.com products from KBA were generally more expensive than Arrowhead products from KBA—and better only in a few cases. With the exceptions of exoticmeats.com's sirloin, and filet mignon, Arrowhead certainly had a better line-up of values, Kobe-like textures, and high scores. (NOTE: You may see a Durham Ranch sticker on your exoticmeats.com product; Durham Ranch is a brand name that's sometimes used.)

Prices to retail customers: higher than average, higher than Arrowhead, but not crazy.



JIMMY P's/Butcher

1833 Tamiami Trail N, Naples, FL 34102

239.643.6328 (tel)

239.643.6302 (fax)

www.jimmypsbutchershop.com

Jimmy P's is your ticket to the terrific Wagyu beef being produced in Australia (see sidebar on this page). Jimmy P's does not import the Australian beef—that is done by an importer and food-service distributor in Vernon, California called Broadleaf (Broadleaf says they will probably start retail sales on their web site, www.broadleafgame.com, at some point in the future). No, the only way right now to obtain this excellent Australian beef at home is through a butcher shop that buys it from

HOW NOW, DOWN UNDER?

I haven't tasted much Wagyu beef from Australia—but what I have tasted has been fantastic! I suspect that Australian Wagyu is going to be a major thing here in coming years. It's a young industry there; Australia received its first wave of “Wagyu genetics” only in 1990. Since then, a lot more cattle have gone from Japan to Australia, and I suspect that the Wagyu percentages of Australian animals are quite high.

Can you obtain it here? Not very easily. The U.S. does import massive quantities of Australian beef, but only 1% of it is Wagyu. Presently, the major importer of Australian Wagyu, California-based Broadleaf, is not selling to retail customers. However, Broadleaf has begun to place their Australian Wagyu in some supermarkets around the country, and in some Whole Foods stores.

Keep your eyes open, mate.

Broadleaf. And Jimmy P's, well-equipped for mail-order shipping, is the first one that Broadleaf mentions. This Florida shop was founded in February, 2002 by father and son, Jim and Jimmy Pepper, who started selling Australian Wagyu beef in 2003. They say that the beef, which they ship fresh, not frozen, is between 50% and 75% Wagyu, and "is of very high quality." From what I tasted, this is not hard to believe; I had only three cuts from Jimmy P's, but they were all top-notch. (NOTE TO SELF: Get to Jimmy P's sometime soon, and check out their lunchtime menu, which includes 1-pound Kobe burgers, the ½-pound Kobe Cajun Bleu Cheese Burger, the Kobe Hot Corned Beef Sub, and the Kobe Meatball Sub with Provolone.)

Prices to retail customers: very, very reasonable.



KOBE BEEF AMERICA/Producer

755 SW 7th St., Ste. #B, Redmond, OR 97756
 541.923.9664 (tel)
 541.923.9674 (fax)
 www.kobe-beef.com

KBA is an important producer of Wagyu beef, which was started in 1990 by a fourth-generation Oregon beef producer named R.L. Freeborn. Much of the production takes place in other venues, though KBA insists that they oversee the process every step of the way. At the beginning of the process, calves are usually bred on other ranches, until they reach a certain weight. Then, KBA transfers the calves to feedlots to be "fattened up" by a diet that includes corn and alfalfa. Once the steer are sufficiently fattened, a slaughterhouse in Colorado processes the beef. KBA insists on the genetic quality of their beef, which, they say, can be as high as 75% Wagyu breed.

KBA did extremely well in our tests, often flirting with Kobe-level butteriness. They distribute their beef to retail and wholesale companies throughout the U.S., but do not sell to retail customers. See the entries for Arrowhead (p. 4) and exoticmeats.com (p. 5) for information on how to receive KBA Wagyu.



LOBEL'S/Butcher

1096 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10028
 212.737.1372 (tel)
 877.783.4512 (toll-free)
 212.650.1934 (fax)
 www.lobels.com

Lobel's—the exclusive New York City butcher shop which has topped so many charts in *The Rosengarten Report*—added to their already stellar collection of meats in June, 2002, when they started carrying Wagyu beef from Strube Ranch in Texas (see p. 7). As of today, Lobel's and D'Artagnan (see p. 5) are the primary purveyors to the retail customer of Strube Ranch Wagyu.

But there's a difference in the Lobel's product—for Lobel's, after receiving the beef from Strube, dry-ages it in their patented

dry-aging lockers for a very long time, at least three weeks, and sometimes as much as six. Furthermore, Lobel's is willing to give you all the stats on the product they receive from Strube—beef that receives some of the very highest internal ratings from the ranch, and beef that is purportedly 93%-94% Wagyu in its genes. Lastly, Lobel's insists that all on-line customer orders be delivered the next day, fresh, not frozen, in chilled, airtight packages.

In our tasting, not every Wagyu product we received from Lobel's scaled the heights of magnificence. However, I was duly blown away by at least one steak from the super-luxury class (the whole beef tenderloin), from the more affordable class (tri-tip and skirt), and from the class of Wagyu cuts intended for long cooking (brisket and short rib).

Prices to retail customers: very high in the luxury cuts, but more reasonable in the "lesser" cuts.



MEADOWS FARM/Producer

4064 Rippleton Rd., Cazenovia, NY 13035
 315.655.9627 (tel)
 www.meadowsfarmllc.com

Meadows Farm is a Wagyu producer in upstate New York that seems to have all the right credentials—but, unfortunately, didn't score especially well in our tasting.

The farm was founded in the late 19th century as a dairy farm—but in 2002, owners Jerry Wilson and Todd Avery decided to switch rails, and traded in their high-caliber Holstein cattle for Wagyu cattle. This is a hands-on operation: the animals, for example, are fed a high-quality feed that is produced right on the 300-acre farm—including a whole year of fat-inducing "finishing ration" that includes alfalfa, barley and straw. The beef is processed by a family-owned, US-inspected slaughterhouse called Kelley Meats in nearby Taberg, New York. The owners claim that the Wagyu beef sold under the Meadows Farm label is always at least 75% Wagyu because they always breed a cross-bred heifer with a full blooded Wagyu bull.

Their Wagyu beef—always shipped frozen—didn't look particularly good when it arrived at my office. The meat was strangely dark, and showed only moderate marbling. Moreover, the taste of the beef was generally bland—except for those cuts with a rim of fat that tasted, for all the world, like old lamb fat.

Prices to retail customers: fairly high.



MORGAN RANCH/Producer

HC 79 Box 42, Burwell, NE 68823
 308.346.4394 (tel)
 308.346.5620 (fax)
 www.morganranchinc.com

Morgan Ranch is a third-generation, family-owned and family-operated cattle ranch located in the Sand Hills of central Nebraska. The ranch has always had a big trade in Hereford show steers and replacement females—but

in 1992 got into the Wagyu game by purchasing cows, bulls, and semen with proven Japanese genetics. That's when they began production of "Kobe Style American Wagyu Kobe Beef" (one of those labeling instances in which the USDA has approved the name "Kobe").

This is a big operation that includes breeding, feeding, slaughter, processing, packaging, and finally distribution to restaurants, supermarkets, gourmet food stores and retail consumers in the United States and, when legal, other countries as well.

The stats they supply look great. Morgan Ranch claims that the meat sold to consumers is between 75-100% Wagyu. Some of the meat is Wagyu-Hereford cross-breed, but they also claim to raise some meat with full Wagyu genes from both parents (that's the 100% part). The "finishing rations" given to the animals are balanced with corn, alfalfa, protein supplements, and distillers' grains. Their beef is wet-aged for 3 weeks and then blast frozen.

In our tasting, I found the beef, in most cases, to be beef that would delight you if you purchased it at a supermarket—but in most cases not suggestive of Japanese Kobe. The really good news is that the prices are not that much above supermarket beef prices!

Morgan Ranch, to its credit, does offer a lot of interesting cuts with unusual names that you may not see elsewhere. But if you're going to buy only one cut from Morgan Ranch—make sure it's their best one, the devastatingly buttery Navel Short Ribs (see description on p. 11).

Prices to retail customers: extremely reasonable.



SNAKE RIVER FARMS/Producer

1555 Shoreline Dr., 3rd fl., Boise, ID 83702

208.338.2500 (tel)

800.657.6305 (toll-free)

208.338.2605 (fax)

www.snakeriverfarms.com

Snake River Farms is a producer and wholesale purveyor of Wagyu beef and other specialty meats—and one, particularly in restaurant circles, with a huge reputation. Idaho, because of them, has taken on a kind of mystical aura when it comes to Wagyu beef. Unfortunately, they do not sell directly to retail customers; to purchase SRF meats, you have to work through Uptown Prime (see p. 8). Even more unfortunately, the grade that's made available to retail customers is at the bottom of the SRF food chain.

Here's what I mean. All SRF Wagyu beef is divided by the producer into the following grades (make sure to ask for the top three when you're in a cutting-edge, upscale restaurant):

- **Platinum.** This highest grade, intensely marbled, is not even raised in the Western U.S.—it comes from full-blooded Wagyu cattle raised and processed in Australia, according to SRF instructions. The beef is distributed to restaurants and hotels in the U.S., and it is also exported to Japan. Many a restaurateur has said to me that when he can get SRF Platinum, he knows he has the very best Wagyu available in Amer-

ica. Unfortunately, I've never had the opportunity to taste it.

- **Gold:** American-produced, and almost as well-marbled. It comes from a 50/50 cross of a full-blooded Wagyu bull with a full-blooded Angus cow. This beef is reserved for food service, and for top restaurants such as French Laundry, Spago, etc. Ask for both of the top SRF grades by name (Snake River Farms Platinum and Snake River Farms Gold) whenever you're at a top-ranking restaurant in America.

- **Black:** Also a cross of a full-blooded Wagyu bull with a full-blooded Angus cow, but with only moderate marbling. This grade too is reserved for food service.

- **Silver:** Very good beef, but without the kind of marbling that distinguishes the best Kobe. The only SRF grade that's sold to retail customers, and only through Uptown Prime.

Beyond these "grade" differences, there is even more diversity in SRF products—because their Wagyu operation is not centralized. As you've already read, some of their beef comes from Australia. The rest comes from western U.S. ranches, "hand-selected" by SRF to take part in the production of SRF Wagyu cattle. Once the calves on these ranches are of a certain weight, SRF transfers them to feed lots where they are fattened up before being processed. Their finishing rations include barley, wheat, straw, potato and alfalfa. SRF Wagyu beef is then processed in a plant in Washington State that is owned by AgriBeef, the large parent company of Snake River Farms. AgriBeef, a leader in the cattle feed business, decided in 1991 to get into Wagyu—but only as a producer of meat that would be shipped to Japan. In 2000, they began selling their Wagyu in the U.S., and the rest is hi-steer-y.

The Rosengarten Report has been very partial to SRF Wagyu in the past. SRF produced a shabu-shabu cut, for example, that was made available to our readers in the recent Japanese issue (February 14, 2005). In our most recent tasting, the meats did very well—though we really felt the absence of the restaurant-level stuff. The only cut that truly soared in our tasting was the obscure *zabuton*; see p. 14 for a full description. Editorial moment: it is really, really a cryin' shame that the incredible stuff SRF has at the high end is not available to retail customers! The restaurant stuff is 5-star!



STRUBE RANCH/Producer

P.O. Box 69, Pittsburg, TX 75686

903.629.3605 (tel)

903.629.3612 (fax)

Strube Ranch is a Texas-based producer and wholesale purveyor of Wagyu beef; it is a completely family-owned and family-managed operation. Their Wagyu beef is not sold directly to the retail consumer; if you want to buy some, the two best sources we came up with are Lobel's (see p. 6), and D'Artagnan (see p. 5).

Strube is a long-time player in the Wagyu game. In the 1970s, the Strube family bought semen from the first Wagyu bulls that were imported from Japan into the U.S. In the 1990s, they also bought full-blooded Wagyu bulls and cows for

breeding; as a result, they say, their beef today is either 100% Wagyu, or what they call “high purebred.” The company also boasts that their food rations, and the rate of animal growth they strive for, are “strongly influenced by the Japanese cattle-raising culture.”

To remain impartial about the quality of their meat, Strube sends it to an outside grader, who grades it based on the traditional Japanese scale, which goes up to 12 for highest amount of marbling. All of Strube’s beef is either graded 9+, which Strube calls “Mishima,” or 6–9, which Strube calls “Gold.” The former is used in some of the finest restaurants across the U.S., and is the only grade that’s shipped to Lobel’s. D’Artagnan receives a mixture of Gold and Mishima grades. This may explain why we found Strube’s from Lobel’s to be generally superior to Strube’s from D’Artagnan—plus the fact that Lobel’s dry-ages the beef further in its own meat lockers, while D’Artagnan receives wet-aged meat from Strube and does no extra aging.

What we received from Lobel’s and D’Artagnan together was up and down in quality; Strube supplied some of the very greatest cuts in our tasting, but also some that were middling. This is a producer about whom it’s hard to generalize.



SUNNYSIDE FARMS/*Producer*

12018 Lee Hwy., Sperryville, VA 22740
540.987.3600 (tel)
540.987.9384 (fax)
www.sunnysidefarms.com

In 1996, just a few miles from one of the country’s most famous and acclaimed restaurants—The Inn at Little Washington, in Washington, Virginia—David and Maggie Cole took possession of an old apple orchard that they turned into a modern, high-end fruit farm with organic practices and sustainable agriculture. But they had their minds on the “fruits” of animal husbandry, as well—for Sunnyside Farms is also a producer and purveyor of Wagyu beef. Much to the delight of Patrick O’Connell, just down the road a piece, who uses a good deal of it at The Inn! And you can buy from them as well—at unheard-of prices for Wagyu, some of the very lowest I’ve seen, if you buy at their on-property supermarket. They also do mail-order retail at average Wagyu prices. The beef is wet-aged for three weeks, and always shipped fresh.

How’s the quality? Hmmmm. Well, the paperwork looks good. The original, full-blooded Wagyu bull they purchased was part of the 1970s genetic influx, and they have bought other full-blooded Wagyu bulls since then to keep the herd going. They claim that their beef is 75% Wagyu in its genes. You wouldn’t know it from our tasting. We tried about 8 different cuts, most of which had a pale look, without serious marbling. Most of the steaks were bland and watery, some of them downright tough. The best cut of all, by far, was a rib-eye, and some of the sirloin cuts were decent.

Prices to retail customers: astonishingly low at the farm, average on-line.



UPTOWN PRIME/*Purveyor*

(Corporate Office)
5005 Wateridge Vista Dr., Ste. 200, San Diego, CA 92121
877.987.8696 (toll-free)
858.638.4725 (fax)
www.uptownprime.com

Uptown Prime was founded in 1998 (along with a few sister ventures) as an e-commerce “marketplace,” with the goal of delivering high-quality perishable goods to retail customers directly from high-quality suppliers. Snake River Farms Wagyu was a perfect fit for them, and Uptown Prime started carrying this Idaho-raised meat about 18 months ago; today, they are the principal re-seller of SRF products, which they ship frozen (only) and overnight to anywhere in the U.S. Shipping and handling are included in the prices listed on their website.

Prices to retail customers: not in the highest bracket, but almost.



YAMA BEEF/*Producer*

709 East Mason St., Mabank, TX 75147
877.792.9262 (toll-free)
903.887.8348 (fax)
www.yamabeef.com

Yama Beef, also known as Gary Yamamoto Custom Beef, is a producer and purveyor of Wagyu beef based in eastern Texas. Retail customers may buy beef directly from the ranch, mail-order—but the company told us a million times that it’s better to procure Yama Beef Wagyu from Allen Brothers, a purveyor in Chicago (see p. 4). Why? Well, there are two levels of beef discussed on the Yama Beef web site:

- Private Stock. This is their top web site grade, featuring a very high level of marbling, flavor and tenderness. It is sold to restaurants, distributors and consumers.

- Diamond Stock. This grade features a slightly lower level of marbling. It is sold to restaurants, distributors and consumers.

Now here’s the rub: Yama Beef claims (supported by Allen Brothers, and by my taste tests), that another level, a higher level they call “Triple A+,” exists—but the only way you can get it is by ordering through Allen Brothers. The Allen Brothers Wagyu, indeed, is a buttery mass o’beef, some of the most Kobe-like that I tasted.

Yama Beef has a special position in Wagyu world, because its founding came from two different “streams,” involving two different Japanese families. Gary Yamamoto is a professional fisherman, and bait-manufacturer, who, with his wife, bought some Texas land in 1997 which had good lakes for fishing. Soon, they realized they could use the land to explore another interest of theirs: the genetics of Wagyu cattle.

Stream #2: A man named Shogo Takeda was the owner of Takeda Farms, home to one of the largest Wagyu herds in

Japan. In the 1970s, Takeda had started developing a herd of American Wagyu in central Iowa—but in the late 1990s was looking to sell off the American holdings.

And this is the confluence of the streams: Yamamoto bought out Takeda, including 200 full-blooded bulls bred by Takeda, and began producing Yama Beef Wagyu in Texas. I didn't get any percentage boasts from the Yamamotos, but they did claim that "our beef matches the best Japan has to offer."

Judging by my Allen Brothers experience, they may be right.

Prices to retail customers: not as high as Allen Brothers, but still high.

THE KINDEST CUTS OF ALL

Results of My Grand Wagyu Tasting

From mid-April to mid-May, my office became a meat locker: we received and sampled almost 100 different cuts of Wagyu beef from all of the major American sources. To get some general sense of a source's style, read the "Major Players" descriptions starting on p. 4. To get ideas for what you're going to order this week . . . read on, right here! I will describe for you the very best specific pieces of meat that I tasted—organized with respect to the type of cut, to make your shopping easier (and listed in alphabetical order). I also thought you might like another organizational flourish: a two-fold division into relatively inexpensive cuts and pricy cuts; I know that when you set out to shop, you're probably most interested in one category or the other.

Please note: All prices are rough estimates, because exact pricing depends on such factors as size of cut, quantity ordered, and current market conditions. Also—in most cases the estimated price does not include shipping, which can substantially raise the price you pay. Make sure to discuss shipping costs with the purveyor before you buy. If shipping is included in the price, I will indicate that in the text.

LESS EXPENSIVE WAGYU CUTS

(Generally under \$20 a lb.)

Please don't make the mistake of fixating on the big boys such as filet, strip steak, ribeye—for, once you expand your field of possibilities, there are some incredible bargains to be had in Wagyu. The leading examples of some of the cuts in the list below were better eating, and gave me more pleasure, than many of the "greater" steaks that sell for 5, 6, 7, 8 times the price! In many cases, these "cheaper" cuts had more of a beefy flavor. You will even find on this list a cut—the Karubi Eye—

that is as buttery as any of the filets, strips or ribeyes! One pricing note: Wagyu prices can be all over the map, so carefully look over the estimated price of any item I list; some prices will be considerably under \$20 (these are the REAL bargains), and some will be slightly over.

BRISKET

Brisket's brisket, right? Wrong! Wagyu brisket is fully worth the extra shekels you'll pay, because the heightened marbling guarantees that you'll get a juicier, richer finished product. But does the fat hold up after 5 hours of cooking, you ask? Amazingly, it does; I know not why, but a lot of it stays right where it is, inside the meat. The BBQ sandwiches I made from the following two briskets (see instructions in sidebar on p.10) brought tears to the eyes of all who tasted them; I can't think of lusher, more emotional food than this!

Arrowhead/KBA Brisket (\$2.95 a lb.). That price is not a misprint! This is very likely the greatest brisket you've ever tasted . . . and it sells for \$2.95 a lb.! This beef was produced by Kobe Beef America, whose products you can obtain through Arrowhead—and I urge you to start obtaining immediately! Their briskets weigh between 9 and 11 pounds (the best 30 bucks you've ever spent!), and show extreme marbling when raw. Now, most cooked briskets are quite juicy in the fattier "second cut"—but the amazing thing about this baby is that the leaner "first cut" was also running with fat and juice. Great areas all over this beast, in fact, with—after 5 hours of braising—tender, shredding meat everywhere.

Lobel's American Wagyu Whole Brisket (\$12.89 a lb.). Especially given the price, I'd rank this brisket—produced by Strube Ranch in Texas—just behind the one from Arrowhead. In general, this meat had a tighter grain, held together more than the KBA meat. I didn't have a preference in this regard. But this brisket doesn't deliver a "first cut" that's as juicy as the KBA "first cut." On the upside—this brisket in general has a slightly deeper, beefier taste. Either one's a miracle.

CLOD HEART STEAK

This cut is not one of my highest recommendations, especially given the price it commands—but I thought you should know about it as a good example of how the Wagyu magic can turn a mediocre cut of beef into something above-average. It is cut from the chuck area of the steer, and is also called Shoulder Clod Arm Roast. The whole cut weighs 8-12 lbs., but meat packers trim it into steaks before shipping. Never expect Kobe velvet from the Clod Heart, but you can expect an excellent steak.

Arrowhead/KBA Beef Clod Heart Steak (\$17.75 a lb.). The piece I received was long (about 8"), not so wide (about 3"), and quite thin—so a super-hot fire is necessary to have a fighting chance. When cooked to rare, my steak had a pretty fine chew: tender, even a little mushy in spots, a little dense and chewy in others. What I loved was the deep, beefy taste; if this didn't cost almost \$18 a lb., I'd recommend it as a really satisfying supermarket kind of steak.

COOKING YOUR WAGYU BRISKET

The following brisket braise is adapted from the recipe called “Simplest, Beefiest Pot Roast” in my book *It’s All American Food* (Little, Brown, 2003). It is so easy—and so delicious, especially with Wagyu brisket!

BRAISED WAGYU BRISKET

6 tablespoons simple olive oil
3 lbs. onions, peeled and sliced thinly
4 teaspoons sweet paprika
8 tablespoons flour
one whole Wagyu brisket
¼ cup crushed tomatoes
6 cups rich beef broth at room temperature

1. Place 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a large pot or sauté pan over high heat. When it’s hot, add half the onions, and cook them until they are nicely browned, just short of burned, and still a little crunchy. Don’t stir them until the brownness starts to take, then stir occasionally. The whole process may take 5-8 minutes. Remove and reserve. Repeat with remaining half of onions. Remove onions and combine with cooked and reserved onions. Stir in 2 teaspoons of paprika evenly. Reserve.

2. Season the brisket well with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Coat evenly with 6 tablespoons of the flour. Add the remaining 3 tablespoons of olive oil to the pan you used for the onions. Place over high heat. When it’s hot, add the beef. Sear well on all sides until the beef is brown-black (this should take about 5 minutes per side.) Remove beef, and sprinkle evenly with the remaining 2 teaspoons of paprika.

3. Pre-heat oven to 300 degrees.

4. Select a large pan for braising the beef. Spread the reserved onions out in the bottom of the pan, making a bed that’s about the size of the beef. Spread the crushed tomatoes over the onions. Place the beef on the onion-tomato bed.

5. Place the remaining 2 tablespoons of flour in a mixing bowl. Slowly blend in the beef stock, adding just a few tablespoons of stock at first to make a thick slurry. Then beat in the rest of the stock quickly. After you’ve made sure the flour is blended, pour the stock over and around the beef. The size of your pan will determine the depth of the stock in the pan; an ideal depth is anywhere from ¼ way to ½ way up the side of the beef.

6. Cover the pan very tightly with aluminum foil, and place in the oven. Baste beef occasionally (once an hour or so) with braising liquid. Cook until beef is very tender; this may take 4-5 hours.

7. When the brisket is tender, remove from pan, and let rest for a few minutes. Meanwhile, skim as much fat from the gravy as possible. You may strain the onions out, but I prefer to keep them in. Cut the beef—against the grain!—into slices that are about ¼” thick. Cover meat with gravy and serve.

CRUCIAL SERVING NOTE: Yes, this brisket is great just as it is. However—you can very easily convert it into the greatest BBQ sandwiches you’ve ever tasted! Either place the warm slices of brisket right on white bread, or on fluffy hamburger rolls, and slather with BBQ sauce . . . or . . . cut thin slices from the cold brisket the next day, spread them out on a large plate in a single layer, slather the slices with BBQ sauce, and pop in the microwave for about 20 seconds, or until just warm. Place on bread and go crazy.

Which BBQ sauce? Up to you, of course. But my fave for this sandwich, without doubt, is the fantastic Red Mud Barbecue Sauce, from Texas. To order, contact TexasInaBox.Com via phone at 877.987.3324, or log on to:

www.texasinabox.com.

MAKES 8 MAIN-COURSE SERVINGS

FLAT IRON

This is an intriguing cut of meat, that is spreading in popularity from the Western states. It was “developed” by a University of Nebraska research team when they realized that there’s an extremely tender muscle in the shoulder (usually part of a blade chuck roast) that, if it can be freed from its connective tissue, becomes an extremely tender and rich-tasting steak. Free it they did, and the Flat Iron Steak was born. Where the story gets really good is the Wagyu connection—for the Flat Iron Steak from a Wagyu steer is especially fatty, velvety and rich-tasting. Plus . . . since the cut’s not well-known, the price is reasonable for what you get. Currently, many restaurants that feature Wagyu beef are starting to put the Flat Iron—so named because it’s shaped like an old iron for pressing clothes—on their menus. But you don’t have to go out—why not grill some at home? I found one really good one for you . . .

Arrowhead/KBA Flat Iron Steak (\$22.99 a lb.). This steak was a slightly triangular, 4”-by-5” slab, not especially thick (only ¾”). But it carried broad bands of fat and tons of intricate marbling. Surprisingly tender, soft, velvety chew, becoming almost purée-like in your mouth—but, make no mistake, not at the level of Kobe butter. Still very, very attractive, with really terrific flavor—almost a touch of pigeon-like gaminess.

FRANKFURTERS

Is it worth it, you ask, acquiring hot dogs made from Wagyu? Can you actually tell that they’re Wagyu? ‘Fraid not. Not really. Most of the hot dogs I tasted were dry, tight, and had no Wagyu character at all. Only one had a certain appeal, though it’s not my kind of frank.

Yama Beef Kobe Brand Made in U.S.A. Beef Franks (\$6 a lb.). Very pale dogs, with a bologna-like look. The taste, too, is in that hot-dog category I call “bologna dogs,” the kind

of dogs that supermarkets sell. But this one is like a premium version of that style—very fine grind, tender chew, much better seasoning and more complex flavor. Try it, if you like this style of dog. Give me a Nathan’s.

GROUND BEEF AND GROUND BEEF PATTIES

Same question again: is a Wagyu hamburger worth it? Totally different answer here! The best Wagyu hamburgers do have an extra richness, a butteriness that really does stand out. And prices are usually quite reasonable, just a little higher than good supermarket ground beef. I did a birthday party recently for my 13-year-old with Wagyu burgers on the grill; her gang absolutely lit up when they tasted them (I never mentioned “Wagyu”) and, believe me, they were thinking a lot more about presents! One word of general advice: loose Wagyu ground meat did better in almost every test than pre-formed patties.

D’Artagnan Wagyu Beef, Ground (\$6.75 a lb.). So much better than the D’Artagnan patties, which sell for the same price! Make thick burgers from this ground beef, cook ‘em very rare, and you’ll love the smooth, creamy texture, along with the wonderfully buttery taste. From Strube Ranch.

Jimmy P’s Kobe Ground Chuck (\$4.99 a lb.). Don’t know how they get away with calling this Australian beef “Kobe,” but I’m not complaining about the price. And, atypically, I’m not complaining about the fact that this product comes in patties—because the patties are very thick (about an inch) and very loose in texture, leading to a wonderful chew that’s very juicy. Could be a little more beefy-buttery, but that won’t stop me from putting another moist patty on the barbie!

Morgan Ranch Wagyu Ground Beef (\$5 a lb.). This ground meat, produced in Nebraska by Morgan Ranch, scores for its flavor: really quite buttery and sweet. However, the

texture is controversial: some will like the mousse-y, fluffy feel, others will find it a weird, almost liquefied, purée version of ground beef.

KARUBI EYE

I found this cut in the availability list of one producer only—but that was enough to make me covet it. I'm told that the Japanese love this cut—which comes from way low-down, the belly of the beast, pretty much where bacon would be if this were a pig. The marvel is that the proportions of fat and lean are perfect; there's plenty of meat here, enough to consider this a steak, but there's obviously plenty of delicious Wagyu fat as well.

Arrowhead/KBA Karubi Eye Wagyu Beef (\$11.99 a lb.). Wow! This amazing thing looks like thin brisket, or like flank steak: a big wide plate, 11" x 8", with thickness varying from 1" at one end to ½" at the other. Rather pale in color. Supernaturally fat-laden, with a big diagonal grain to the meat. You sear it on the outside, make sure it's very rare on the inside, then cut it in thin, broad slices. Then you light up like a Christmas tree. What we have here, folks, is one of the only cuts in this whole tasting to achieve a Kobe-like texture; the silky butteriness is phenomenally good. And the steak tastes like butter, too—with the wonderful flavor of the fat roaring through the whole chunk like wildfire. At this ridiculously low price . . . how can you not give this a try? Note: cut around the gristle that's present.

SIRLOIN

Some of the best values in Wagyu are in the sirloin category—as long as you're looking for good, beefy beef, and not expecting buttery velvet. Indeed, disappointments in sirloin are not uncommon, because the name itself sometimes gives consumers unrealistic expectations. A true sirloin is not a shell steak, not a strip steak, not from the high-rent short loin neighborhood at all. Butchers call the sirloin the "upper hip," and it is found behind the short loin (which is mid-steer), and in front of the round (which is the *derrière*). There are innumerable ways for butchers to divide it up, and a baffling number of names that include the word "sirloin." Usually, "top" sirloin is the quality cut. I never buy sirloin steak—but I will now be buying sirloin Wagyu, for sure, which benefits royally from its breeding. If you're looking for a great hunk o' beef to throw on the grill, filled with quintessential beef flavor, pleasingly hearty and chewy in texture—Wagyu sirloin could be it. Prices are not rock-bottom, but they're certainly not at the levels of strip steak, filet and ribeye prices.

Jimmy P's Kobe Wagyu Top Sirloin (\$12.99 a lb.). And this is the sirloin you want—the best one, at one of the least

expensive prices! Australian in origin, this was a wonkin' big steak, looking almost like an exaggerated strip steak: 8½" x 3½" x 1¾" (I really appreciate that 1¾" thickness). It was a dull reddish-brown, but had lots of very fine-filigree marbling. This visual clue paid off big-time in the tasting; when it emerged from my grill with a warm-rare center, it was more buttery at that center than many of the more-expensive strip steaks I tested. And the flavor—round, satisfying, complete—was some of the very beefiest in the tasting. A real crowd-pleaser at a great, great Wagyu price.

Exotic Meats/KBA Kobe Beef Top Sirloin Steak (\$24.95 a lb.). This dark, reddish-brown sirloin was an odd 5" x 2" rectangle with exposed sides—obviously a larger piece of beef cut into geometric regularity. But it had great marbling throughout, a thickness of 1½", and came off the grill as one of the most velvety sirloins, running with juice. Really sweet and beefy in flavor.

Uptown Prime/Snake River Farm Top Sirloin (\$32 a lb.). This steak was a small rectangle—about 4½" x 3½" x 1". Tender feel to the touch, with good delicate marbling. Surprisingly tasty compared to SRF cuts that are available to consumers—more beefy and impressive than either their strip steak or their filet mignon. Great beef-eater's texture, pleasingly chewy-hearty. Not at all like Kobe, but really good. The price, unfortunately, *is* Kobe-like.

SHORT RIB

Another big thrill in this tasting was the joy of short ribs—a cut that becomes simply incredible when the steer is Wagyu. Even without the Wagyu blood line it's a fatty, well-marbled piece of meat—but the marbling goes through the roof when Wagyu's involved. And the prices can be very reasonable! This cut was one of the big finds of our tasting.

Lobel's American Wagyu Short Rib (\$23.98 a lb.). If you want to cook short rib in the traditional European way—long-braising, until the meat's practically falling off the bone—you must RUN to Stanley Lobel and pay whatever he's asking for this amazing piece of beef! I acquired only one chunk, a rectangular one-bone block that was about 4" x 2" x 2"—and, after long, slow, cooking (make sure to keep your oven below 275 degrees), it became the most incredible piece of long-cooked beef I've ever tasted. Big globules of fat still visible inside, even after 5 hours. Amazingly buttery in flavor, velvety in texture, yet not falling apart, still retaining its textural dignity. Astonishing.

Morgan Ranch Wagyu Navel Short Rib (\$8 a lb.). But then came the big surprise—a short rib you can cook fast, for the rare-and-buttery effect! We're all so used to long-cooking short rib to achieve tenderness—despite the fact that Korean BBQ has shown, over and over again, that if you have the right cut of short rib, and cook it perfectly, short rib can be tender while still rare! This amazing hunk of beef produced by Morgan Ranch—and sold at an amazing price!—is a huge, boneless slab of short rib meat, almost a foot long, 8 inches wide, just about half-an-inch thick. There's fat and silver skin on the outside, but the big news is the intra-muscular fat: this beef is positively engorged with broad bands of streaky fat. To cook

THE BIGGEST BARGAINS IN WAGYU

The big surprise of this story was the great desirability of Wagyu versions of "lesser" cuts of beef. Here are the items that most dramatically stood out for their ratios of quality to price:

- Arrowhead/KBA Brisket, \$2.95 a lb. (p. 9)
- Arrowhead/KBA Karubi Eye Wagyu Beef, \$11.99 a lb. (p. 11)
- Jimmy P's Kobe Wagyu Top Sirloin, \$12.99 a lb. (p. 11)
- Morgan Ranch Wagyu Navel Short Rib, \$8 a lb. (p. 11)

it, you must first cut the raw meat into broad, thin, diagonal slices, against the grain, slices no more than $\frac{1}{8}$ " thick. Then you must flash-sear them on a super-hot ridged grill pan (no other cooking method I tried worked as well), for no more than 20 seconds a side. You will end up with tender-velvety-resilient pieces, whose big bubbles of fat virtually "pop" in your mouth. The butter rules the taste as well, an intoxicating blend of beef fat and griddled beef. Very distinctive. One of the most Kobe-like bites in the tasting . . . at \$8 a lb.!

■ SKIRT STEAK

I LOVE skirt steak, which used to be called Roumanian Tenderloin in the Jewish restaurants of a certain era, and used to be very affordable. Then the fajita craze hit, and skirt started to shoot up in price. Today, \$7 or \$8 a pound at the super-market is not uncommon. So you can imagine where *Wagyu* skirt has gone on the price scale—especially when it's great *Wagyu* skirt, with a wonderful intensification of intra-muscular fat. I tried a number of skirts in this tasting that were reasonably priced, but that weren't especially *Wagyu*-like. To get the full effect, it seems, you gotta pay the big bucks.

Lobel's Dry-Aged American Wagyu Skirt Steak (\$30.98 a lb.). I know, I know. That's a lot of moolah for a Roumanian Tenderloin. But the 13-ounce steak that Lobel's sent me—almost 22" long, about 2½" wide, close to $\frac{3}{8}$ " thick at the thickest part, the whole an intensely bright cherry-red—was, without doubt, the greatest skirt steak I've ever tasted. Raised on Strube Ranch in Texas, this damned thing—even in the spots that were a bit chewy—always provided that bursting-blob-of-fat feel in my mouth as soon as I started to chew. Excellent sweet beef taste, with a very slight suggestion of game. Okay, I'll give it the ultimate endorsement: on some special occasion, some night soon, despite the price, I intend to buy some for special guests.

■ TRI-TIP

If you've ever been to Santa Maria Valley, near Santa Barbara, California, you know all about tri-tip—because this large slab of beef is the traditional choice there for local grilling, first popularized in the 1950s by an enterprising local butcher. It is a curved, triangular muscle cut from the bottom sirloin, weighing about 2 lbs., and, when it's good, has sirloin-like beefiness. Add *Wagyu* to the equation—and, in superior examples, you have well-marbled tri-tip, which can have some of the Kobe buttery quality. This is a great example of a lesser cut that really benefits from *Wagyu*-ization.

Lobel's Dry-Aged American Wagyu Tri-Tip (\$16.49 a lb.). Lobel's tri-tip, from Strube Ranch in Texas, was dark pink in color and extremely well-marbled. The chew was intriguing: not velvety, making you work a little bit, but finally bursting with juicy-buttery rivulets. Great flavors: deep beef, plus, undoubtedly from the Lobel dry-aging, something minerally and even a touch cheesy. This tri-tip must be cooked very rare, otherwise it starts to seize up and get tougher. To serve, cut into $\frac{3}{8}$ "-thick medallions against the grain.

D'Artagnan Wagyu Tri-Tip (\$8.40 a lb.). Should you

order the same cut from the same producer (Strube Ranch) at half the price from D'Artagnan? Maybe, maybe not. Do it, if price is a factor. Do it, if you don't like the taste of aged beef. But here are the reasons in favor of spending twice as much: the aging on the Lobel's tri-tip made it a little more tender than the D'Artagnan tri-tip, and a little more buttery, as well as more complex in taste. The D'Artagnan tri-tip, however, is awfully good. Ya gets whatcha pay for.

Morgan Ranch Wagyu Tri-Tip (\$10 a lb.). The most buttery-silky-juicy tri-tip of all came from Morgan Ranch, and at a very good price. This is the texture champ of the tri-tip division. Unfortunately, this version falls down a bit in the flavor department; it doesn't *taste* buttery, just mid-range beefy.

THE ITEMS THAT DO SEEM LIKE KOBE

There wasn't much beef in this grand-scale tasting that seemed exactly like the highest-quality, ultra-buttery Kobe beef of Japan. The following four items are the ones that came closest. And do note that only two of them are from that trio of filet-strip-ribeye that everyone seems to covet!

- Arrowhead/KBA Karubi Eye Wagyu Beef, \$11.99 a lb. (p. 11)
- Lobel's American Wagyu Whole Tenderloin, \$79.71 a lb. (p.13)
- Morgan Ranch Wagyu Navel Short Rib, \$8 a lb.(p. 11)
- Uptown Prime/Snake River Farms Strip Steak, \$40 a lb. (p. 14)
- Uptown Prime/Snake River Farms Zabuton, \$50 a lb. (p. 14)

MORE EXPENSIVE WAGYU CUTS (Anywhere from \$25 to \$175 a lb.)

Finally, we come to the heart of the batting order—the major-league cuts that are supposed to make us swoon. But do they? Well, in some cases, yes they do; the most sensational piece of beef in the whole tasting was in this group, and a couple of near-sensational hunks were close behind. However, given the sociopathic pricing that goes on in this group—and given how good strips, filets and ribeyes can be when they're not *Wagyu*—I'd say that any potential buyer of items from this group had better shop very carefully indeed, unless money is truly no object. Almost every producer, purveyor and butcher shipped us filet, ribeye and strip—so what follows is a very severe selection of what's out there.

■ FILET MIGNON, WHOLE BEEF TENDERLOIN

Let's face the music: if you want to put individual filet mignons on your table, or a whole beef tenderloin (from which filet mignons are cut), and if you want them to be *Wagyu* beef, you're going to have to ante up a fortune. Is it worth it? Well, to many steak-lovers, the smooth, relatively lean, almost mushy-tender qualities of filet are way overrated; there's constant comparison among steakhouse vets of filet and strip, the two sides of a porterhouse, with filet almost always losing out in the key category of flavor. On the other hand—you're never

likely to find a more flavorful filet than a Wagyu filet, since this very special breed means that the filet carries a lot more flavorful fat. For me, honestly, I'm not going to spend \$350 on a whole tenderloin too often. That said—when I really want to dazzle guests with the highest possible Kobe magic, my prime candidate does lie in this category . . .

Lobel's American Wagyu Whole Tenderloin (\$79.71 a lb.). And this is my prime candidate, the highest-rated morsel of beef in the whole tasting. Very bright cherry-pink, with an uncommon amount of exterior fat, and a surprising degree of fine intra-muscular fat for a tenderloin. I gave this large hunk a good grilling, until it was charred on the outside, warm-rare on the outside. And that's when the moment occurred: the quivering center was killer silky, tender-resilient, with big bubbles of fat exploding in your mouth. This meat was positively alive. Nothing in the whole tasting came closer to the thrill of Kobe than this. Even the grayer meat just under the charred exterior was silky and sexy. And the flavor! Though this cut has nothing to do with prime rib, the taste was definitely akin to the kind of sweet beefiness you get in prime rib, with a lingering, primal, meaty-bloody finish. This was the finest moment, in our tasting, for both Lobel's and Strube Ranch.

Allen Brothers Wagyu Filet, Complete Trim (\$175 a lb.). Remember: the great Chicago purveyor Allen Brothers gets Yama Beef's highest grade beef, then dry-ages the meat themselves before sending it off to you. There'd better be a good story here, because this 2½"-diameter individual piece of filet mignon (2½" thick, too), was the most expensive piece of meat by far, per-pound, in our entire tasting. Well, I can't deny it: it was fabulous. Tender, silky, buttery—especially when you let the warm-rare chunk sit for a few minutes, during which time the butter mounts, I swear it. Lovely mainstream steakhouse kind of taste, though a little more aged character might have pushed it to the top of the ratings, as well as the top of the list of debts. But there's no debate about quality: this is a very special chunk of meat.

Exotic Meats/KBA Kobe Beef Tenderloin, Filet Mignon (\$77 a lb.). Another individual filet, this one at less than half the price of Allen Brothers'. A touch less distinctive than the two products above, but still wildly fatty, buttery and flavorful (good sweet beefiness) for a filet mignon.

D'Artagnan Gold Wagyu Beef Tenderloin (\$52.40 a lb.). Once again, a D'Artagnan-sold piece of meat from Strube Ranch goes against the same piece of meat (theoretically) that's Lobel's-sold—and Lobel's wins out again. Make no mistake: this was a great D'Artagnan tenderloin—but just a little less magical, a little less velvety than Lobel's, with a touch of sponginess. Of course, you will pay 25% less for it, making this your best-value filet. Your call.

■ RIBEYE

When steak-lovers crave flavor above everything else, it is often ribeye they dream of. The typical ribeye steak has a big eye of

moderately fatty meat, which is flavorful enough—but then features a big rim of super-fatty meat around the eye, which is insanely flavorful. It's almost difficult to eat that rim by itself—but when you combine a bit of both spots in one bite, the results are sublime. Now calculate this fattiness times Wagyu—and you can see what the shouting's about. Plus, ribeye Wagyu commands the lowest prices in this whole premium category—our pieces cost anywhere between \$16.75 a lb. (for a really good one! see below), to \$67 a lb. (for a moderately disappointing one from Allen Brothers). One problem plagued the category, however: lots of producers, for some reason, like to ship ribeye steaks that are way too thin.

Yama Beef Private Stock Ribeye, and Diamond Ribeye (\$55 and \$45 a lb., respectively). You shouldn't buy my highest-rated ribeyes. Yes, these two steaks from the great Yama Beef were incredible—the greatest examples by far, in the whole tasting, of “cream-cheese-injection” marbling, with the Private Stock steak a little bit more insanely aswirl with streaks of white fat. Nothing else in the tasting looked anything like these! Flavors from the cooked steaks were also great: deep, buttery, prime-rib-like, tremendously satisfying. But these steaks were ruined, for me, by their cut—each one less than ½" thick! You could tell that the meat under your teeth is willing to do the Kobe butter-bud-burst display—but there's not enough of the meat to get a tendency going! And the steaks have to end up kind of grey if you don't want to overcook the centers. What a waste of fabulous, fabulous material. My advice: call Yama Beef and beg for thicker cuts.

Sunnyside Farms Beef Ribeye Steak (\$38 a lb.). This ribeye was clearly Sunnyside's best piece in our tasting, a really great ribeye steak. Looked exactly like a steak cut from a smallish prime rib—about 5" long, 3" wide, with, thank goodness, 1 ½" of thickness. More important—it felt like a lump of butter in my hands. And buttery it was on the palate, both in texture and flavor—not Kobe level, but damned good, particularly in the rim, where the fat was so rich it was almost lip-sticking. Good resiliency in the chew, as well. Great prime rib taste. This is technically my #2 ribeye—but this is the one you should buy!

Arrowhead/KBA Wagyu Beef Ribeye (\$32.00 a lb.). What you've got here—for a relatively reasonable price—is an excellent, sweet and beefy steak, that would make you very happy in most contexts. And the rim around the eye even has a hint of Kobe butter to it. The rest is merely something that would stand out in a regular steakhouse. That's not so bad!

■ STRIP

OK. Start asking questions of hard-core steak freaks, and you'll soon find that most of them rate strip steak—also known as shell steak, New York strip, New York steak, Kansas City strip, and a million other aliases (sometimes even “sirloin!”)—to be the most flavorful, and the most generally satisfying of all steaks. Yes, it's not as velvety as a filet—but some steakheads

The
quivering
center was
killer silky.

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find that strip texture to be “hearty” next to filet’s “wimpy.” And, of course, in Wagyu versions, with so much more fat, everything about the strip should zoom heavenward. But guess what: though I am among the strip-committed, I know of such great non-Wagyu ones across the country (see the July 23, 2001 *Rosengarten Report*), that I did not find the Wagyu strips in this tasting to be a quantum leap forward. Good, yes. In a few cases, great. But great enough to justify the prices?—up to 120 freakin’ dollars a pound? I’m not so sure.

Arrowhead/KBA Kansas City Strip Steak (\$37.50 a lb.). OK. I *would* pay \$37.50 a pound for this lovely, narrow strip, thick-cut, with lots of swirly marbling and a huge strip of flavorful fat on one side. This steak brings us right up to the border of main-line Kobe butter; it’s not quite there throughout the steak, but big globs of fat from the warm-rare center do explode in your mouth. I love the char this steak picks up, and the deep caramelized taste that results—as well as the complex, slightly minerally aged taste in the fat. Though it’s not Kobe, this one really bests the best of non-Wagyu strips across the country.

Allen Brothers Sirloin Strip Steak (\$109 a lb.). If looks could kill, I would have died upon opening this package. I might have died as well after looking at the price tag. Smaller than most strips, but redeemed by its 2” thickness, its gorgeous, bright color, its massive marbling, its sexy feel in your hands. The cooked product seems plump, silky, bursting with juicy richness, especially when you include the side fat in your bite. And that fat provides extraordinary flavor—the most minerally aged flavor that I found in any steak in our tasting. Not quite as Kobe-esque as the Arrowhead/KBA Kansas City Strip, but truly outstanding.

Uptown Prime/Snake River Farms Strip Steak (\$40 a lb.). With strip steak this good from SRF’s lowest quality level

(silver)—it’d be amazing to see how good the black, gold and platinum levels can get! This was a long, thin strip steak, cut 1¼” thick, with lots of big bands of visible fat. Oh . . . my . . . God. This was the only strip in the tasting that did the Kobe-like meltdown in my mouth, the cells of beef collapsing into ooze before my very palate. Order this, by all means—at its not indecent price—to experience this textural thrill. So why is it only #3 in the strip ranking? Because, believe it or not, that buttery texture in this steak did not translate into buttery flavor. Oddly, this steak tasted appealingly clean—but lacked any beefy flavor at all! Go figure.

Jimmy P’s Kobe Wagyu New York Strip (\$36.99 a lb.). This Australian beauty was also a little deficient in the flavor department, a little bland—but had a fantastically winning velvet texture all around, with flowing butter in the warm-rare spot. Great look, too—much bigger and plumper than American strips, with mouth-watering marbling that’s almost cream-cheesy. Good value.

ZABUTON

Here’s your new word for today: zabuton. It was new to me when I found it recently, but I have now branded it in my beef vocabulary forever. We’ve never heard of it before, because it’s a beef cut that’s a specialty of Japanese butchers—a cut not normally extracted by American butchers. It lies in that anatomically complicated area called the chuck, or the shoulder; the zabuton, when you go in to get it, is a fantastically tender and fatty, sinew-free lump of the chuck roll that means “pillow” in Japanese—which just about sums it up. I found only one producer savvy enough to market the zabuton—and, despite a rather high price for an “unknown” cut, you should definitely get this wonderful thing on your table fast, before it gets “discovered” and the price goes higher!

Uptown Prime/Snake River Farms Zabuton (\$50 a lb.). Mind-bendingly beautiful. The real Kobe-like “cream cheese” deal; this steak, which featured deep-red meat, had so much fat running in it that the overall color effect was very nearly pink. It’s an odd shape: 4½” long, just 2” wide, and an inch thick—looking more like a *piece* of a steak than a steak. But oh, the butter, the butter. So rich, and melting, and juicy, even when the degree of doneness climbs to medium-rare. This zabuton was a texture revelation—that would have zoomed to the very top of my chart had there been a deeper, beefier flavor to it. ■

The Hall of Fame: The Ten Highest-Rated Items in My Wagyu Tasting

Every item in my tasting received an internal rating from me. Items were not judged for their resemblance to traditional Kobe beef, nor did price play any role in these ratings. The system was simple: the more pleasure I got out of an item, the higher the rating I gave it.

PLATINUM MEDAL RANK

- Lobel’s American Wagyu, Whole Tenderloin, \$79.71 a lb. (p. 13)

GOLD MEDAL RANK

- Allen Brothers Wagyu Filet, Complete Trim, \$175 a lb. (p. 13)

- Arrowhead/KBA Kansas City Strip Steak, \$37.50 a lb. (p. 14)
- Jimmy P’s Kobe Wagyu Top Sirloin, \$12.99 a lb. (p. 11)

SILVER MEDAL RANK

- Allen Brothers Sirloin Strip Steak, \$109 a lb. (p. 14)
- D’Artagnan Wagyu Beef, Ground, \$6.75 a lb. (p. 10)
- Lobel’s American Wagyu Short Rib, \$23.98 a lb. (p. 11)
- Morgan Ranch Wagyu Navel Short Rib, \$8 a lb. (p. 11)
- Uptown Prime/Snake River Farms Strip Steak, \$40 a lb. (p. 14)
- Uptown Prime/Snake River Farms Zabuton, \$50 a lb. (p. 14)