

FUTURE OF WAGYU AT STAKE

When is a wagyu burger not a wagyu burger? That is the question on - diners' lips across the country as the Ferrari of the beef industry becomes mainstream and features on fast-food menus such as Subway.

Wagyu is the most expensive meat in the world. It comes from an ancient Japanese bloodline and is rich in intramuscular fat – or marbling – that melts into the cooked flesh to deliver a sweet, buttery flavour and soft texture.

Premium wagyu sells for about 30 to 50 per cent more than other specialist beef varieties such as grass-fed angus, or 75 per cent more than feed-lot, grain-fed beef – and promoters of full-blood wagyu are fighting to retain its exclusivity.

The industry is pushing for a “truth in labelling” scheme that would clarify whether meat came from full-blood wagyu cattle or cross-breeds.

A few years ago, wagyu was an exclusive product found mainly in the fine- dining restaurants of the world's best chefs.

It is highly revered in the restaurant world. At Nobu in Melbourne, diners can buy it tataki style for \$50 per 50 grams. At Neil Perry's Rockpool Bar and Grill, 200-gram sirloin and fillet steaks sell for \$115 each. A simple wagyu burger with bacon, Gruyere cheese and pickle costs Perry's customers \$24.

But those prices are for top-end, full-blood wagyu that exceeds the Australian marble score scale. This wagyu, grown by a pioneer of the Australian wagyu industry, David Blackmore, has a marble score of 9-plus, above the Australian scale's official peak of 9. Each beast can be traced back to its Japanese ancestors.

What diners don't know, and restaurants don't have to tell them, is that there are far inferior grades of wagyu on the Australian market.

At the lowest end of the scale is F1 wagyu that has been cross-bred with another breed – such as angus or hereford – and consists of just 50 per cent wagyu genetics.

Full-blood wagyu promoters estimate that 95 per cent of wagyu beef sold in Australia is F1 grade.

In Japan, only full-blood wagyu can be called wagyu, which translates as “Japanese cattle”.

“Full-blood wagyu is as different to traditional beef and F1 wagyu as chicken or pork or lamb is to beef – it is really a different product,” says Blackmore, who runs a herd of 2500 full-blood wagyu on his farm on the Goulburn River flats in Victoria.

“We must have truth in labelling. The consumer must be protected . . . the restaurateurs we market to understand the exquisite quality and flavour from full-blood, but I'm not sure the general public does when they see it at Subway.”

Blackmore is one of about 10 full-blood wagyu meat producers in Australia. He supplies some of Australia's top restaurants, including Quay, Tetsuya's, Nobu, Aria, Becasse, and Rockpool Bar and Grill.

His herd is fed a secret traditional Japanese ration, which is low in grain, for about 600 days, resulting in a marbling grade of 9-plus in more than 90 per cent of his beef.

They are slaughtered when they are 30 to 33 months old.

The rich, buttery flavour is so intense that Perry prepares Blackmore's steaks with only one other ingredient: salt.

Perry goes through about nine carcasses a month at his three bar-and-grill restaurants in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. The 200-gram sirloin and fillet steaks have the highest price tags of \$115. Alternatively, a 400 gram Cape Grim grass-fed sirloin costs \$60, twice as much beef for half the price.

Blackmore's produce is clearly marked as full-blood on the menu. "You can have a wagyu steak for \$25 or you can have one for \$120 but you won't get true wagyu for \$25," Perry says. "You should have to write cross-bred on the menu if it is cross-bred."

The executive officer of the Australian Wagyu Association, Steve Bennett, says there is growing support in the industry for improved wagyu labelling and clarity about breed composition.

The association's council agreed at a board meeting on Wednesday to embark on a consultative stage with industry members for a "truth in labelling" scheme.

An earlier scheme proposed by the association drew "a fair amount of support, but a fair amount of antagonism", Bennett says.

"Some of our members . . . have established their own brands and some might have felt if the association produced yet another brand or identity in the market it might cause confusion, but I gather from those involved in the marketing of wagyu beef that there is keen interest in having truth in labelling."

The risk of the Japanese moving to prevent future exclusion of non Japanese use of the term wagyu internationally, in much the same way as sparkling white wine can only be called Champagne if it is from the region in France from which it takes its name, could be another reason for the industry's change of heart.

The Japanese are fiercely protective of their wagyu heritage, banning the export of any full-blood wagyu genetics since 1996. But as wagyu loses its exclusive brand image in the Australian market, there are other exotic breeds biting at its heels.

Blackmore supplies mishima beef exclusively to Perry. Mishima is believed to be the original native Japanese cattle that was cross-bred with European breeds to produce wagyu. The mishima breed has records dating back to 1739.

Blackmore has exclusivity to use the semen from the only bull that has ever left Japan, and grass feeds his 50-head herd. Perry gets about six carcasses a year, which he sells at his Melbourne restaurant. Premium cuts sell for \$95, about 25 per cent cheaper than wagyu.

"We're out of the premium cuts in a week," Perry says.

"It flies out the door. It has all the traits of the wagyu and marbling and mouth-feel so the textures are very wagyu-like, yet because it's grass fed, it has this great length of flavour and cleanliness to it and that's a very unique quality to get in a piece of meat that actually has that texture."

Mishima is much smaller than wagyu and less commercially viable, so Blackmore is not sure how much to develop this line.

"I don't want to get the mishima [side of the business] too big, too quick and find we've compromised the quality of our wagyu business," he says.

Another less commercially viable cattle is chianina, a huge, long-legged, muscular, pure white Italian breed that delivers very lean beef.

Daniela Mollica and her husband Ian Walker are believed to be the only farmers producing chianina for meat in Australia.

They grass feed a herd of several hundred on their farm in Victoria's South Gippsland. They hope to expand it by about 50 per cent over the next few years, but they don't want to get too big.

Their animals are not full-blood chianina but full-bred (or pure bred), which means they have been bred up from a cross-breed to a high percentage of chianina genetics over a number of generations.

The couple cannot meet consumer demand. About eight cattle are slaughtered a month. Two are broken down into 10-kilogram "home packs", which comprise a mix of cuts for \$175.

It is sold as Isola Chianina and doesn't have the buttery flavour or fatty mouth-feel of wagyu, but being grass fed for two years means it develops a distinct, clean flavour.

Melbourne restaurateur Guy Grossi has been ageing a carcass in his coolroom for a few weeks. He will start selling it next week.

The classic Tuscan dish bistecca alla Fiorentina (Florentine T-bone steak) will be on the menu at Florentino. It usually sells for \$100 for two people to share.

"People are definitely asking more questions, they'll certainly look at the menu and be more inquisitive about a breed and where it comes from," Grossi says.

"People are much more driven by provenance these days."

Gamekeepers, a game and meat specialist, supplies Isola Chianina to a dozen restaurants in Victoria and two in Adelaide. Feather and Bone in Sydney supplies the general public. The bistecca sells for \$65 a kilogram. It sells out in a week. A new carcass is expected next week.

"We'll offer it through our weekly newsletter that we send to our private customers and I expect all the bisteccas and rib-eyes will go the week it's offered," Feather and Bone co-owner Grant Hilliard says. "We try to retain some for our loyal walk-in customers as well. It won't go far."

So is chianina the next wagyu?

"The country doesn't have the stock to be the next wagyu and I don't think that's our goal," Mollica says.

Instead, she wants customers to be aware of some of the less common varieties of beef cattle, and for the marketplace to be more supportive of smaller farmers growing different breeds.

"We're not in it to become the next big thing," she says.