

Beer and Massage for Japanese Beef:

Fact or Fiction

Introduction

Say the words, “Kobe beef,” and an image of unbelievable tender, juicy and highly marbled beef comes immediately to mind. In the mind’s eye, one can see a Japanese man or woman feeding beer to a Wagyu steer and then spending hours massaging the animal while periodically taking a swig of beer or sake and blowing it into the back of the cattle. While it is true that in the past the Japanese have produced the world’s most highly marbled beef, misconceptions abound regarding the methods by which they produce it.

It is true that cattle are occasionally fed beer in Japan. Most cattle in Japan are essentially on feed all of their lives because grazing land is not available. There is some grass on Hokkaido and on Kyushu but many cattle are raised in total confinement from birth to slaughter. Cattle are often fed a finishing diet for at least 16 months and are 30-34 months of age in the case of steers and up to 46 months old for heifers (heifers may have calved once prior to finishing) prior to slaughter. Because cattle are fed so long, and particularly in summer months when the interaction of fat cover, temperature and humidity depressed feed intake, many cattle go off feed. When this happens, beer is fed to the cattle to stimulate appetite. Japanese cattle feeders do not ascribe any magical powers to feeding beer nor do they associate the practice with an increase in carcass quality; they merely feed beer as part of an overall management program designed to keep the cattle on feed.

It is also true that cattle are sometimes massaged in Japan. Once again, this practice does not affect the deposition of marbling. It is a common-sense practice required occasionally for cattle that are tied in one place for months and have no opportunity to exercise. The massaging is done to make the animal more comfortable and relieve stress due to stiffness that can result from inactivity. Cattle often become so lethargic that they will not get up and eat without coaxing. The massaging prolongs the length of time that cattle can be fed before they go to slaughter and thereby increases fat deposition.

Brushing cattle with beer or sake is another practice which creates great interest. It, too, is rare and founded in practicality. Japanese beef cattle experts believe that hair coat and softness of skin are related to carcass quality in Wagyu cattle. Consequently, judges at livestock shows in Japan place considerable emphasis on haircoat in the ranking of fed cattle. The winners of cattle shows in Japan receive substantial premiums upon the sale of the animals. Brushing the haircoat with sake improves the appearance and softness of the animal’s haircoat and is therefore of economic importance in show cattle. In commercial cattle feeding operations, however, cattle are usually sold on the rail (after removing the hide and carcass quality is known). Consequently, haircoat is of no economic value and brushing with sake is not routinely practiced.

In addition to the practical aspects of feeding beer, massaging and brushing with liquors, these things are also done on occasion for the sake of the image associated with the gourmet meats that result from the production of Wagyu cattle. Ambiance and mystic are nearly as important in the eating experience as the flavour, juiciness and tenderness of the beef.