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Wagyu: The Beef to Beat

Research shows Wagyu beef shines as a consumer favorite

By Burt Rutherford

Dale Woerner, Ph.D., is a meat scientist with years of experience researching the composition of Wagyu beef. “I think it’s pretty fair to say we’ve accumulated some pretty good data in favor of Wagyu. We’re looking at a product that is, in fact, superior in terms of eating experience, not just because of high levels of marbling, but because of the composition of the beef these animals produce.”

It's that exceptional eating experience that has led to the breed's growth and acceptance by both beef producers and beef consumers. “Wagyu is something that I’ve seen, over about the last 15 years, grow and grow and grow. And now I would think it’s fair to say that it’s hotter now than it ever has been before,” the Cargill Endowed Professor at Texas Tech University told Wagyu breeders during the recent World Wagyu Conference in San Antonio, Texas.

“As we increase the level of marbling, we increase the likelihood of a positive eating experience,” he said. Since Wagyu generally marbles at levels significantly higher than USDA Prime, that accounts for the rapidly growing consumer demand for Wagyu beef.

“Some of the research we’ve done where we’ve taken F1 Wagyu-cross product and investigated the differences in eating characteristics and the reality is, Wagyu is always out on its own every single time.”

In fact, Woerner told Wagyu breeders that some of the highest levels seen in F1 or halfblood crosses come from Wagyu-dairy crosses and Wagyu-Angus crosses. “We’re starting to see quite a few Wagyu-dairy crosses showing up in West Coast calf ranches and some of those migrating even into the High Plains of Texas,” he said.

“You’re taking two breeds of cattle, including Wagyu and Holstein and Wagyu and Jersey, which have tons of synergy in terms of marbling and eating quality characteristics. This is a magical combination.”

Beyond marbling, Woerner said Wagyu cattle have a higher proportion of what he calls invisible fat. “At the cellular level, they have more phospholipid and that’s contributing to a greater amount of fat within the same range of

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“Wa” means Japanese and “gyu” means cow.

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marbling.”

That’s important because about two-thirds of the eating experience difference is driven by the amount of fat, he said. “Wagyu in any shape or form outperforms Prime in terms of total crude fat and marbling.”

Woerner walked Wagyu breeders through multiple factors affecting eating quality, like the amino acid profile, the fatty acid profile, the volatile chemicals that produce flavor and sensory attributes, and tenderness.

Take aroma for example. “The aroma of beef produced by its chemical signature is really what helps differentiate high quality beef from lower quality beef,” he said. “And Wagyu is extraordinarily special in that regard.”

Then there’s taste and tenderness. In blind taste tests, Wagyu consistently is rated highest in both, he added. “Where it does outperform, it outperforms in overall flavor desirability, beefy brothy notes, brown grilled notes, buttery beef, and the list goes on,” he said.

Looking at shear force tests which determine tenderness, New York strip steaks from Wagyu carcasses had the same tenderness as conventional tenderloins. “So not only is this beef producing better flavor profiles, it’s also more tender on average,” he told Wagyu breeders.

The fatty acid profile of beef is different for Wagyu, he said. “And we believe that this is the number one factor contributing to the differences we find in eating characteristics.”

Indeed, Wagyu has a higher percentage of two fatty acids associated with better health in humans as well as several fatty acids associated with the buttery flavor profile Wagyu beef is known for, he said.

With a nod to Certified Angus Beef, by far the most successful branded beef program in the country, Woerner said it’s possible other breeds could have enjoyed similar success. “Could other breeds be Wagyu beef? No. There’s no comparison within your set of beef, particularly in the conventional market.”

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