

life & style

All for the love of Tajima cows

Is there any truth behind the stories that surround Kobe-beef husbandry?

Daniel Krieger  
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

When you hear the term, “Kobe beef,” a few things are likely to come to mind: the velvety, fatty richness of the meat, the extraordinarily high price of a steak and the lavish lifestyle of the cattle. The pampering these cows receive is renowned and the image of beer-chugging bovines has been seared into the popular imagination.

But it turns out that the imagination is where such tales belong. So says Yoshinori Nakanishi, a Kobe cattle farmer who’s been in the business for nearly 40 years. “Neither I nor any beef farmer I know would ever dream of giving cows beer,” he says.

Nakanishi, 56, explains that what Kobe beef really comes down to is love for the highly sensitive creatures, proper care and feeding them the right blend of grains and grass. The rest is taken care of by nature, which does a fine job of turning out a meat whose level of quality is in the stratosphere.

A relative newcomer to Japanese cuisine, beef didn’t become part of the diet until a little over 100 years ago. Till then, cows native to Japan, called *wagyu*, had been used only as work cattle. Of *wagyu*’s four varieties, the one that’s risen to international stardom because of Kobe beef is Ta jima, which belongs to the Kuroge Wagyu (Japanese Black) breed, hailing from Hyogo Prefecture. Yet there’s always been a fair amount of confusion about what exactly Kobe beef is.

To settle the matter, in 1983 the Kobe Beef Marketing and Distribution Promotion Association was formed. They created a strict grading system with a scale of A1 to A5. According to the Japan

Meat Grading Association, true Kobe beef can only come from purebred Ta jima cattle born and raised in Hyogo that achieve a ranking of A4 or A5. Anything of a lower grade is labeled Ta jima beef. Restaurants that serve real Kobe beef are certified and display a small bronze Ta jima cow statue, the association’s official seal of authenticity.

The Nakanishi farm is nestled among the rolling green hills of the Kobe countryside, about 25 km west of Kobe city, overlooking a vineyard. Nakanishi learned the trade from his dad, who started the farm just after World War II. After taking over, he created the Nakanishi Group, a collective of 20 farms that he oversees and which follow his regimen.

Two years ago, he passed ownership of all the farms on to his 30-year-old son, Hitoshi. And though he likes to say he’s “retired,” he still toils up to 14 hours a day. Together, father and son tend their herd of 170, a fraction of the Nakanishi Group’s 3,000 total, half of which are slaughtered every year.

Seventy percent of the whole group’s cattle, and 99 percent of Nakanishi’s own cattle, earn the esteemed Kobe beef grade. Of the 5,500 head of Ta jima cattle that go to market yearly, only about 3,000 get this imprimatur, a full third of which comes from the Nakanishi Group, the leading producer in the industry.

One task that makes a day at the farm so long is the vigilant monitoring of the herd.

“Each animal has a unique temperament and (different) needs,” Nakanishi says. “My job is to figure those out and keep them in good health.”

The animal’s eating habits are observed and their physical condition is constantly checked, starting with the eyes. “I could increase the number of



Raising the steaks: Yoshinori Nakanishi (center) at his farm with his wife Eiko and son, Hitoshi. Below: Sirloin steaks from Nakanishi’s farm, shows the fat-marbling that Kobe beef is famous for. COURTESY OF YOSHINORI NAKANISHI/SOTOIKE YOSHIMITSU



cows I raise by not doing all of this,” he says, “but then the quality wouldn’t be as good, would it?” The awards Nakanishi has won at competitions for his champion beasts attest to such perfectionism.

Another key factor in the raising of Kobe beef livestock, he says, is the feed — a carefully chosen organic mixture of grass, rice straw, soybeans, wheat, barley and corn (without any growth hormones or antibiotics). “There is a technique to how I blend all of these together,” he explains, “which depends on the season, the age of the animals, and their condition.”

A big concern these days is foot-and-mouth disease, which hit southern Japan in April, wiping out a few hundred thousand cattle. Kobe, so far, has been in the clear. Though Nakanishi aims to produce great-tasting beef, he places an even higher priority on making sure it’s safe, and his chemical-free approach, combined with his meticulous care assures this.

Consumed by the endless task of taking care of the herd, Nakanishi leaves the business side to his friend and longtime associate, Sotoike Yoshimitsu, the president of Teishin Chikusan, a Japanese beef-distribution company that handles most of Nakanishi’s stock. (One

Kobe Beef: fact versus fiction

**Kobe cows are fed beer.**  
**False.** Yoshinori Nakanishi says this myth started 30 years ago when a restaurant did a promotional stunt in which a Ta jima cow was fed beer.

**Kobe cows get regular massages.**  
**False.** “If I massaged my herd of 170,” says Nakanishi, “I’d have no time left for sleep.”

**Kobe cows listen to classical music.**  
**False.** Nor do they listen to any other genre.

**Kobe beef is sold outside Japan.**  
**False.** No authentic Kobe beef is exported, mainly because of limited supply. Some restaurants abroad offer a cross between Wagyu and Angus cattle, which may amount to a Kobe-style beef.

**There is no way to be certain that a piece of Kobe beef is genuine.**  
**False.** This can be checked, using the 10-digit serial number that each animal has been issued, which can be checked on the Kobe Beef Marketing and Distribution Promotion Association’s Web site: [www.kobe-niku.jp](http://www.kobe-niku.jp)

**U.S. basketball player Kobe Bryant is named after Kobe beef.**  
**True. (And not vice versa.)** The story goes that Kobe’s father saw the item on a menu, thought it sounded cool and gave the name to his son. That has not, however, stopped Bryant from suing the city of Kobe because he feels the beef’s name harms his own brand. (D.K.)

kg of sirloin goes for ¥30,000.) Two years ago, in response to the lack of authentic Kobe beef venues, Yoshimitsu opened the Yoshimitsu Kobe Beef Steakhouse in Kobe’s city. “My mission,” he says, “is to protect the Kobe beef brand and pass it on to the next generation.”

Though these cattle don’t live the lush life they are believed to, as far as cattle standards of living go, they have it made. The are kept in peak health: given a natural, organic diet; and, when compared to some other beef farms, their life is relatively stress free. It’s doubtful that alcohol, massage and music could add anything to that.



A Ta jima cow statue (left) on display at the Yoshimitsu Kobe Beef Steakhouse proves that the restaurant serves Kobe beef in accordance with guidelines set by The Kobe Beef Marketing and Distribution Promotion Association. Right: A Ta jima steer takes it easy at the Nakanishi farm. AI ITO/DANIEL KRIEGER



WORDS to LIVE by

As told to JUDIT KAWAGUCHI

Shinno Yamasoba, 58, is the vice head priest at Daijyoji Temple in Hyogo Prefecture’s Kami town. Founded in 745, Daijyoji is nestled between peaceful rice fields and sheltered by layers of mountains. The closest city is Kyoto, about three hours away by local train. Still, visitors often make the journey to Daijyoji to see its exquisite Buddhist paintings, 165 of which are designated Important Cultural Properties of Japan. The main temple was built at the end of the 18th century as a collaboration between Mitsuzo (1716-1786), the head priest of Daijyoji, local carpenters and one of Japan’s greatest painters Maruyama Ohkyo (1733-1795). Designed to be harmonious with the surrounding gardens and mountains, the temple’s walls are made of *fusuma* sliding doors, painted on both sides with birds, monkeys, trees and flowers. Depending on which of the 165 sliding doors are opened or closed, the rooms and interconnecting spaces offer different views that metamorphose from naturally beautiful to breathtaking. An almost endless number of views can be revealed. Recently, however, this picture of pure harmony has been disrupted, breaking the heart of priest Yamasoba. To protect Ohkyo’s 45 masterpieces, they have been stored in a concrete warehouse next door and, using the latest digital technology, replicas of the works were created for the temple. Yamasoba has no problem with replicas being used, but he doesn’t understand how the copies have ended up so different from the originals.

**More characters and longer words don’t mean more meaning.** When Japanese Buddhists die, they receive a *kaimyo* (heavenly name) for their next life. Each kanji expresses something about the deceased’s life and the more characters we put together, the more it costs. Many people believe that the longer the name, the better it is and the happier the person will be in his or her next life. It’s not true! That’s like thinking that a bigger house will make one feel better. Or that the more one talks the smarter he or she is.

**We’ll know if the road was correct when we arrive.** That’s how we Buddhists think. But since a monk’s road is never straight, the trip is always fun. It really doesn’t matter where I’m going.

**Our bodies need fuel but it is our minds that need nourishment.** *Shojin ryori* is the traditional Japanese vegetarian cuisine at Zen temples. Monks in training eat only this type of food to cleanse their mind and heart. Actually most young men want to eat meat but they get *konnyaku* steak (jelly-like food made from yams) instead. We also don’t eat any vegetables that have a strong odor, such as scallions, garlic and the like. This cleansing process takes 100 days, but for Zen monks it

takes three years. During training our diet is so low in calories that we feel physically weakened, but mentally we get sharper every day.

**Ceremonies help the healing process.** In Buddhism, we have many rituals to remember the deceased. After the death of a loved one, his or her relatives and friends go to the temple to pray every seven days until the 49th day, which is when he or she is reborn. There are countless more events in the first year and many more later on. After three, seven, 13, 17, 25, and 33 years, we have major ceremonies. Also, a few times each year relatives gather at the temple for prayers and a feast. All these events are chances to share memories of the deceased and to help everyone heal and move on.

**Kids are smart: If there’s a way to skip school, they will find it.** In Japan, many children quit going to school simply because they can. Parents and teachers appear to easily accept this kind of behavior. Any excuse, real or imagined, works — bullying is a good one, because nobody can really check if it is true. This means many kids of high school age are at home, playing games at night and sleeping all day. After a while, parents ask for our help to get those young adults out of the house and working. Maybe we need to accept the fact that not everyone needs or wants a formal education.

**Technology should not be blamed for human error.** Japanese digital technology is so advanced that it’s possible to make perfect replicas of things. Our replicas, however, turned into cheap-looking copies because we made the mistake of hiring an art director to guide the technology team. This director manipulated the images to recreate what he thought the paintings might have looked like 200 years ago. He used more gold leaf and brightened the colors. His added touches destroyed Ohkyo’s original strokes. Luckily, at certain times each year visitors can see the originals on show.

**The best and worst part of Japanese culture is the concept of *shikatanagai*.** This means that we accept reality as is and we don’t blame anyone. If we feel frustrated, we blame ourselves, because ultimately everything that happens to us is our own doing, our own fault. For example, even though the replicas are not what the originals look like and not what we wanted, we still paid the full price — ¥130 million — and accepted the outcome. It’s all over and done with, so there’s no point in crying over spilled milk. That’s *shikatanagai*.

**I’m not a real monk yet because it’s hard for me to accept everything and forgive everyone.** I’m still a *deshi*, a young man in training. My wife’s the best monk. She’s the most enlightened being I know.

**Life is dark and filled with hardship, so people need religion.** Everyone experiences tragedy at some point, and at that moment, the power of religion becomes apparent. It was the same for us, too. Our second child was born sick, and we were told that she would die in one week. We cried so hard and wondered why such a tragedy had to happen to our family. Buddhism helped us a lot. Back then, we prayed a lot together. We still do.

**The happiest place to be is in the position to help others.** If I didn’t study Buddhism, I wouldn’t have drawers of knowledge to open and share with others.

Judit Kawaguchi loves to listen. She is a volunteer counselor and a TV reporter on NHK’s “Journeys in Japan” Learn more at: <http://judittan.blog58.fc2.com/> Twitter: judittokyo

ON DESIGN

By Jean Snow

Working across the grain

Award-winning designer Mikiya Kobayashi is the director behind Kime, a new line of beautiful wooden household accessories for Hokkaido-based manufacturer Dreamy Person. Named after the Japanese term for wood grain, all of Kobayashi’s designs emphasize the natural beauty of his medium with a clean, modern aesthetic. The Kime collection currently includes the following seven items: a bottle opener (¥2,940), a toothpick holder (¥2,300), a shoehorn, both long (¥10,500) and short (¥3,990), a pen case (pictured, ¥5,040), a tape measure (¥2,625), and a clock (¥7,350). Each item is also available in one of three wood finishes: maple, cherry or walnut.

<http://dreamyperson.com>



Mountains of beer for the summer

The summer heat is not over yet and most of us are still finding a chilled glass of beer a great way to keep heat levels down — or at the least help you forget the discomfort. We’ve taken quite a liking to the winner at the Judge’s Special Prize at the Tokyo Midtown Award, Keita Suzuki’s Fujiyama Glass, produced by handcrafted glassmaker Sugahara. Yes, the name is a literal reference, as glass design is inspired by Japan’s most sacred of

mountains, Fuji, to which a beer’s frothy head makes a pretty snowcap. Now there’s actually a good reason to pour yourself a drink with a tall head. The Fujiyama Glass sells for ¥3,776 — a price that matches the height in meters of the real Mount Fuji — and comes packaged in a beautiful wooden box.

[www.sugahara.com](http://www.sugahara.com)

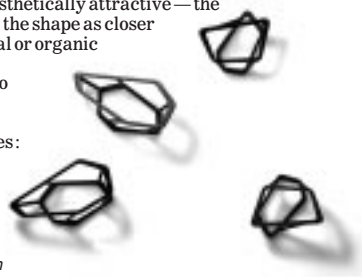


Sprinkle a little practical beauty on the walls

Functional objets d’art are a theme this month, so we feel obliged to bring up design collective Naft’s Sprinkle hooks. Quite possibly the furthest from what you would expect a hook to look like, Naft’s have a simple geometric form that gives each one a number of protruding “mounting” points. Not only does this makes them aesthetically attractive — the company describes the shape as closer to something natural or organic — but it also makes them more secure to hang things off.

The Sprinkle is available in two sizes: 15 x 9.3 x 5.5 cm at ¥4,200, and 10 x 9 x 5 cm at ¥3,780.

<http://naft-design.com>



Hanging up your artwork

Design duo Fift has an interesting proposal: Turn those miscellaneous objects that people leave on side tables and counters — keys and such, yes, we all do it — into wall-mounted pieces of art. Well, kind of. At least the wall-mounted part is true, as the Eninal Tray Mini (we can only assume there will be an upcoming larger version) is a tray that works vertically instead of horizontally. Essentially a flat wall magnet, the Eninal tray holds, or rather lets you hang metal objects in any way you like. Take a minimalist approach and hang a single



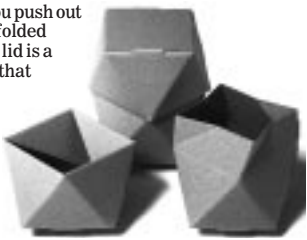
object, letting it draw attention to itself, or throw a whole mess of stuff on there and create a personal installation project about the things you need to hang on to. The Eninal Tray Mini — at a width and height of 35cm — costs ¥11,550.

<http://fift.jp>

A box with a twist

Papercraft toys are all the rage these days — such as Twelveton’s Pneuma-box that we covered last year — and we’re glad to see that such paper constructs are now influencing the design of more practical products. Take Azumi Mitsuboshi’s Lid Thread boxes for instance. Purchased as a flat sheet template, you push out ready-cut shapes that are folded together to form a box. It’s lid is a clever spiral construction that fastens with a twist.

The Lid Thread is available in two shapes — as a cube or antiprism — each priced at ¥735. A couple of videos on the maker’s Web site show exactly how to assemble the pieces.



[www.kaminokousaku.jp](http://www.kaminokousaku.jp)