

Massage My Beef

KOBE-STYLE BURGERS ARE THE BEST WORDS BY VANESSA SALVIA | PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

A basic burger for lunch is super, but when that burger's made from Kobe beef — or American “Kobe-style” beef — it's superlative. Wagyu, the Japanese breed of cow that produces Kobe, is genetically predisposed to produce meat with fine filigrees of fat marbling throughout. According to legend, Japanese Kobe beef cows are hand-fed beer and sake, revered as national treasures and massaged daily. (Truly, it's more like *rubbed* daily.) The lavish care and increased feeding of barley and wheat, and the extensive fat marbling, results in the tenderest, juiciest and most flavorful beef available. It's also expensive; in Japan, a Kobe beef steak can cost upwards of \$200. In the U.S., “Kobe-style” beef comes from Wagyu (literally “Japanese cattle”) cows cross-bred with Angus cattle, creating a breed more suited to American ranching conditions and with less sticker shock. While Japanese Wagyu are raised like veal, here they're not penned and are partially raised on grass, but they're fed longer and better than other domestic cattle.

At Eugene City Brewery, the Rogue Ales outpost in Eugene, a regular burger is \$7.75 while a half-pound American Kobe burger is \$11.95 ... spendy, but how much is too much for the best burger you've ever eaten?

Jack Joyce, founder and president of Rogue Ales, says that Rogue “tried to provide that Japanese experience for \$100 or \$200 bucks in a hamburger for under \$15.” He's eaten real Japanese Kobe beef and says he can't tell the difference between

American-style Kobe and the real thing.

Eugene City Brewery — along with most everyone else who sells American Kobe in the Northwest — gets its beef from Snake River Farms in Idaho. The cows are processed in only one place in Idaho, so, although it's more expensive, the beef is single-sourced and relatively local. “You could have a hamburger, theoretically, that

came from 10 different farms and 10 different animals,” Joyce says, “but you know where all the Kobe comes from. You know how the animals are treated and raised.” ECB has taken many standard menu items and made them using Kobe beef, including chili, tacos, hot dogs and, for St. Patrick's Day, Kobe corned beef. Snake River Farms also provides ECB with kurubuto from the Berkshire breed of hog, the pork equivalent of Wagyu.

Long's Meat Market in Eugene sells ground American Kobe beef along with ribeye and New York steaks. It's twice the price of non-Kobe beef, but Eric Pitkin, Long's meat cutter, vouches for the fact that there's a “big, noticeable difference.”

Kobe beef is nutritionally superior as well as rich and buttery smooth. The cows' diet results in a higher ratio of desirable monounsaturated fats to saturated fats, and their special diet provides

an increase in omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids over typical beef.

When cows have a better life than me, I'm not sure if I should be insulted or impressed. But when those same cows are destined to become some of the finest and most flavorful beef in the world, I can only say, “Medium rare, please.” ■



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