

Culinaire
Saisonnier



*** US BEEF ***



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AMERICAN BEEF

A taste of liberty

Over the last few years, imports of American beef to the European Union have been limited. But today, in the context of a growing domestic production deficit, exports to Europe of American beef from animals that have never been treated with hormones is growing steadily. So how about a brief trip to the land of the cowboys to find out the reasons for this new infatuation with American beef?

The USMEF (United States Meat Export Federation) invited us to follow the whole production process, from the farm to the plate. On the way, we were to meet several experienced guides, a real necessity in the complex world of the beef industry.

The USMEF is a non-profit organisation created in 1976 to promote American beef throughout the world and open up new markets for beef, pork, lamb and veal. This organisation's mission is to inform consumers about the specific attributes of American meat, set up educational programmes for professionals, and of course, help increase American exports. But let's move on to the farmers and ranchers, many of whom are USMEF members through their own organizations.

For this article, we will concentrate on beef. Telling you about the other meats would require a stay of several months in

the United States. We were not alone on this trip; a group of carefully selected great European chefs came along with us. Representing France, there was Laurent Delarbre (Intercontinental Paris), Patrick Juhel (Westin Paris) and Thierry Paludetto (Beef Bar Monaco). For The Netherlands, -there were Edwin Kats (La Rive) and Mario Ridder (de Zwetheul), -and Italy was represented by Claudio Sfiller (Marriott Milan). -From Germany - we had a French chef, Patrick Coudert; the owner of four cooking schools, he lives and works in Germany, so we can assign him the title of German chef.

The livestock market

Our first stop took place near the centre of the United States: Oklahoma City. The area surrounding this city has one of the larger concentrations of beef cattle in the country. The cattle there are sold by auction.



We know that in the United States everything is big. This fact is fully confirmed here. Thousands of pens house young cattle that eventually will provide beef to cities throughout the United States. You are going to ask, as we did incidentally, why is this city one of the centres of the cattle business? Very simply because

Oklahoma City is one of the transportation hubs for this part of the country.

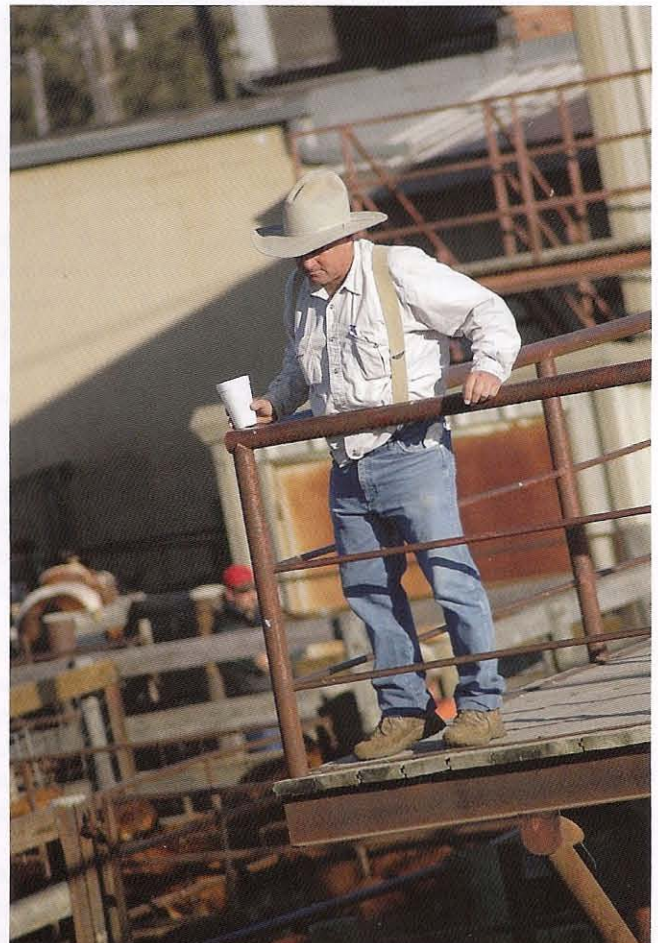
Since 1910, Monday and Tuesday have been the two days a week when business is done at the Oklahoma City auction. No less than half a million animals pass through here annually, which means approximately five

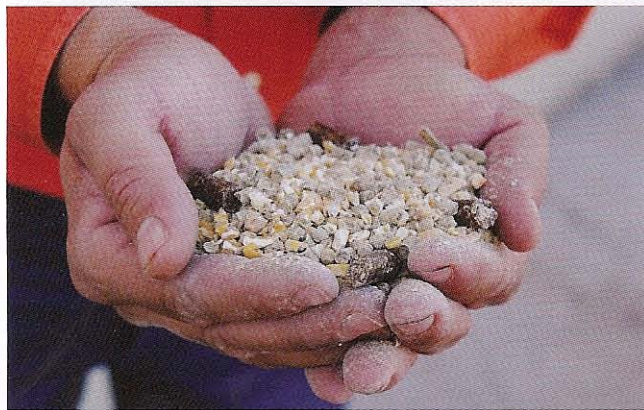
thousand head of cattle per day of operation. This is doubtless why the auctioneer's palaver sounds more like artistic rap than anything else! Ninety percent of the market consists of young animals intended for numerous feedlots where they will be raised for their meat. A small percentage of them are headed for dairy farms and the rest are marked for reproduction.

On the screen numerous figures and formulas appear. The animals come in, are examined by everyone and the auction begins. The animals are weighed in advance. The total weight of the herd on stage is displayed on the screen. It is translated into pounds and as a general rule we are talking about something like one US dollar per pound in weight.

The ranch

Oklahoma City represents the whole mythology of the world of the cowboys. Anyone who believes that boots with spurs, big cowboy hats and belts with enormous buckles can only be seen in films these days is definitely mistaken. The adage "you can't







judge a book by its cover" is appropriate here, because hospitality is second nature to the Americans. This was confirmed beyond our wildest hopes by the ranching family we visited about an hour's drive from the city.

We all talked enthusiastically about Wagyu, the marbled meat with its outstanding reputation, originally intended solely for the imperial court of Japan. How did this type of animal arrive in the United States and what are the criteria for quality? "It started in 1978 when American professors helped the Japanese during an eye operation on one of these animals. As thanks, we received four pure-bred Wagyu bulls. We were able to create embryos and raise them." The mother

was not Wagyu, however; she belonged to the very high quality breed of Black Angus. The calves that came from this impregnation were therefore not pure bred. "In 1989, we were very lucky to be able to create embryos thanks to a pure Wagyu cow and since 1992 we have been able to create animals that are 100% Wagyu."

Reaching this level of breed purity is no guarantee, though, because the classification originates from a rather complex system. "The classification goes from F1 to F5, where the latter represents the purest line. For that it is necessary for the bull to be descended from a line of five generations of pure-bred Wagyu. You could compare

this to an espresso, with the bull as the pure black coffee and the bearing mother as the milk. If milk is added, the espresso will be less and less black until it becomes a cappuccino. Unfortunately, some people use black colouring to obtain an espresso. For our family the standard is not limited to F1, but currently corresponds more to F4." F1 means that only one of the parents is pure-bred Wagyu.

Quality

The meat from the ranch is less marbled than what we are familiar with under the designation of Wagyu. This is logical because we know that meat exported to the EU can come only from animals that are a maximum of thirty months old, a consequence of the EU's import quota system. Our hosts explain, "An animal first develops its bones, then its muscle mass and finally its fat. Unfortunately, for Wagyu thirty months is a little too short a time to finish this last step. The marbling of the meat nonetheless remains superior to that of most other breeds."

The ranch, which has a few hundred heads, has only twenty pure-breds. We feel a little ill at ease with bulls of this type, because only a fragile electric fence separates our camera from their enormous muscular mass. Our host's wife asserts that they are very peaceful and, as if to confirm her words, opens the gate to go in and caress the huge beasts.

To achieve perfection in breeding, this ranch, which is eligible for exports to the European Union, works with a combined programme of embryos. Five eggs are withdrawn from each cow and then fertilised with the sperm from a 100% pure-bred bull. All this takes place in impeccable conditions in a state of the art laboratory. The embryos from this programme are accepted for export. For the Wagyu this remains, incidentally, the one and only option because to date the trade in living calves from one country to another remains prohibited. The embryo produced is then placed in the uterus of a surrogate mother cow that is meticulously selected.

Before starting the tour of his property, our host still wants to clarify a few details. "People often talk about Kobe beef and many people think that it's the same thing as the Wagyu. Kobe is in fact a Wagyu meat but it

comes exclusively from the Japanese city of Kobe. Many countries produce Wagyu today; in the United States alone there are no less than 136 breeding farms but the quality differs from one country to the next and consequently it is important that a system clearly defines its quality criteria." The Dutch chef Edwin joins our host: "I find that this is true in my restaurant as well, where meat from this ranch is on my menu. We have to define the quality standards clearly and in this way explain the high price of this meat. In other places and on other menus, Wagyu can be found for half the price. This meat in other restaurants is classified F1, or of a lesser quality, and this is not mentioned."



The Safari

The sun beats implacably down on us when we go out in the pick-up to tour the ranch. We catch sight of the cattle moving in a small group. From far away, another herd that is blacker than black, a full forty cows, then, here and here, a few head of cattle that are red in colour. It appears, confirming what our breeder says, that a Wagyu is not always black. A great majority of the ranch is covered with prairies of grass and indigenous plants. The cattle are taking advantage of the shade under a large number of nut trees, or rather pecan trees as the Americans call them. We are amazed once again at the area made available to the animals. Our host tells us that there are "one thousand acres. We also have animals set aside that have five acres each."

We stop at the barn where the feed is stored. Prompted by our usual curiosity, we want to find out its composition. But as nice as our host is, the recipe for the 1,100 pounds of feed per day remains a

mystery. We learn only that corn, proteins and fibres make up the majority of the mixture, whose composition is the strict application of the original Japanese recipe.

In view of the enormous size of the ranch, we might imagine a large staff of workers, but this is not the case. The rancher's wife works in the city, and only our host, his mother and a neighbour, who comes to feed the animals, remain at the ranch. Mother and son must have a great deal of work because they own a similar ranch in Nebraska and they are present during the monthly butchering for which fifteen to twenty head are selected. The incredible hospitality, the feeling of being on safari, and the contact with the animals that may one day grace their menus leave all the guests with a special feeling.

American Black Angus

Since being imported from Japan, the Wagyu has slowly grown up here just like an ani-

mal with typically American characteristics. Another breed which also has its origins outside the United States, but which today can claim to be American, is none other than the Black Angus. It is one of the most popular breeds grazing on millions of acres of the country. A few figures: around 100 million head of cattle are raised on more than 800,000 ranches. Texas, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma are some of the most important states for raising cattle.

The American beef found in Europe is guaranteed free from growth hormones. It meets all the standards of the NHTC programme (Non-Hormone-Treated Cattle). This programme dates from 1999 following an agreement between the United States and the European Union. It makes it possible to trace the meat and verify that it meets the standards of the programme and complies with European directives.

Food safety concerning beef is a priority for American producers. During the last ten years, nearly 400 million dollars have been invested in this field. The quality of the meat is the result of intensive research in cattle rearing. All the necessary requirements are strictly monitored by the USDA (Department of Agriculture), the FDA (Food and Drug Administration), and the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). The beef comes from animals kept in pastures, fed on grass and other indigenous plants. During the final period before slaughtering (normally at least the last 100 days), the animals are fattened up with a balanced mixture of corn, cereal grains, hay and alfalfa. It is precisely this finishing with grain that gives the flavour that we associate with American meat and which differentiates it from European or from South American beef. US beef is especially





tender and juicy. The greatest characteristic of the Black Angus is without question the fine marbling of its meat. We will go into this subject in greater depth later on at the slaughterhouse.

This product is especially popular in the kitchens of the chefs who accompanied us. They value the quality as much as the consistency of the product. As they emphasised, they cannot allow themselves to disappoint a customer!

A slaughterhouse that exports to the European Union

We were already impressed by the quality of life of the cattle but we were just as impressed by the slaughterhouse. In Arkansas City, Kansas, in the immensity of the plains, a water tower and a gigantic complex indicated that we had arrived at our destination. We toured a phenomenal slaughterhouse that handles only Black Angus. As Europeans, we find it difficult to imagine that a slaughterhouse handles only a single breed. Per day, more than 1,100 head of cattle with their black coats are slaughtered there.

The slaughterhouse was built in collaboration with the Texas A&M University with the sole objective of achieving the highest quality beef possible. We have already mentioned the strict rules laid down by the European Union; their application is clearly in evidence when we are on site. Before the animals destined for Europe are

slaughtered, everything is completely cleaned. Hygiene and efficiency are the key words and, incidentally, all the chefs in attendance are impressed by the hygiene standards in place.

Besides that, we are especially aware of the respect for the animals. Up to the packaging, we have the impression that everyone is aware of the fact that the product that they are processing was still alive just a few hours before. There are laws to ensure that the animals are slaughtered without stress. Throughout the day, an inspector goes through the pens sometimes literally on all fours, to regulate the movement and spacing of the animals. The hall that accommodates the cattle is provided with air conditioning because the cool air and subdued lighting soothe the animals. When these 1,200-1,300 pound animals come in, they make their way down a long lane until they reach a metal collar in which they usually place their head. Before they realise what is happening, they are stunned then slaughtered and hung up; this all happens very quickly.

Once the artery is severed, the animal is bled before arriving in a place called Slaughter 2, where its internal organs are removed and the carcass is cut in two. The carcass is then marked with a label containing all possible information. As you know, since the mad cow disease crisis, the spinal cord is taboo. It is completely sucked out by an ingenious vacuuming device. Before the carcass reaches this stage, it has already been



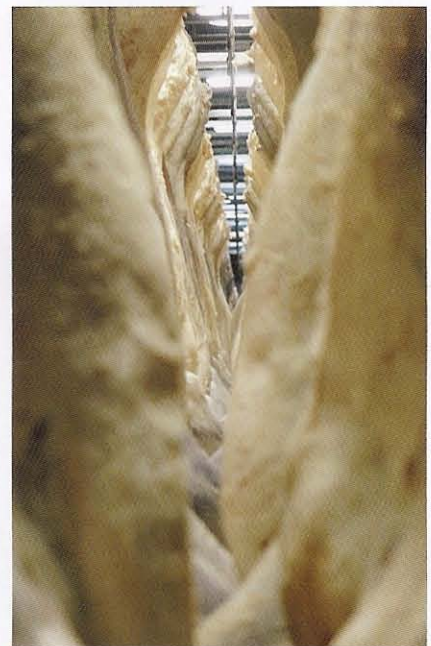
washed four times. Offals, which are not very popular in the United States, are primarily destined for export. In two hours, the half-carasses are all hanging in a hall provided with hundreds of sprinklers spraying distilled water. This helps chill the carcass during the 48 hours that the meat rests.

Grading

Once the period of rigor mortis is over, a very important quality control procedure takes place. The carcass is cut at the level of the ribeye to reveal meat that has a deep red colour and is magnificently marbled. A computer installed in the grading hall is used to photograph that part of the meat and then compare it with a reference photo. This system could be compared with a computer-assisted evaluation of digital printing. The best quality fulfils the requirements for PRIME, followed by CHOICE and SELECT.

A rail system takes the carcasses selected to the fabrication floor. Nearly 320 people are cutting here with precision. Each employee in this section has six weeks of training before being able to work on a cut like a ribeye. Between each step of the process, different labelling checks take place and close to ten people spend their day monitoring their colleagues' work. The meat is deboned, trimmed and vacuum packed in under two hours.

However reliable computers may be, nothing is left to chance and personnel stand



by to ensure they operate correctly at each stage of the process. Checking that vacuum packing is carried out correctly or that the cuts are packaged in the right containers are just a few examples of the monitoring carried out. The containers are then conveyed with careful control towards a distant Europe.

Meat hanging

The countryside is far behind us as we amble along through the Meat Packing District. This neighbourhood in the heart of New York City has lately become fashionable. We are here to see the godfather of the place and are visiting DeBragga butcher's shop. Doug Roudda is the person best able to explain to us the meaning of Dry Aging, hanging meat in a closely controlled and monitored environment. DeBragga no longer slaughters animals but has the cuts delivered to its depot. Doug

explains that "the Meat Packing District could best be compared with Rungis in Paris. Unfortunately a great many businesses here are disappearing. We have nine trucks on the road every day and 60% of the meat stays in Manhattan."

A brief tour of the property led us to the cold rooms, a very impressive place. Hundreds of batches of sides of beef were hanging there, some of them still very fresh, others with a deep black colour with a layer of fine mould on the outside. The odours that are released there are a cross between a butcher's shop and a cheese drying room.

Dry Aging is a process that came naturally decades ago when meat was transported in full view of everyone in wagons throughout the whole country. Doug explains the evolution of this process to us in the cold rooms. "The lines of sides of beef, bones and fat included, are arranged

on planks to allow the meat to rest in the best possible way. Thus the short loins rest in a room kept at 36°F with a humidity of more than 90%. The higher the temperature, the faster the process will be. The meat itself has a very high percentage of humidity and the objective is to reduce it. Meat is made up of water, muscle tissue and fat. Thanks to large fans that move the air in the cold room, the meat dries quickly. Then it has a deeper and more intense flavour and it becomes more tender. The bones and the fat on the outside protect the meat from harmful bacteria."

The meat is hung from 21 to 28 days and has a total weight loss of 22%. The excess fat is removed and only the best part of the meat kept. Meat processed in this way must, after dressing, be cut in the days that follow and be consumed rare. Doug tells us "it is necessary to cook it just until the fat melts,





if not it will be too rich and hard to digest.” Doug showed us a special order, meat hung for nearly four months. “*Here we are talking about a weight loss of around 50%. The flavour that results from this is quite special, so you have to be a fan.*” Dry aged meat is more expensive than fresh meat.

The technical cuts

We learned in school that techniques for cutting meat differ from one country to another. These different cuts can produce some surprises. Jay McCarthy did a demonstration on the subject of typically American meat cutting for the European chefs present in a Manhattan studio. Our professor could be described as a great specialist. He travels the world in order to promote American meat and as a parallel activity he supervises five restaurants in Colorado.

It is not possible for us to relate all the explanations to you here but fortunately there is an American work entitled *The Meat Buyer's Guide* that describes these cuts in detail. This guide presents all the technical cuts of beef, pork, lamb, poultry and veal in the form of photos and drawings. For each one a concise explanation accompanies the photos and most importantly, each cut is numbered. If a chef wants to have his rib-eye cut in a precise way, for example, all he has to do is give the number of the cut to his butcher. Jay: “*The most important thing for me is that a chef knows what he is getting. This little cut of meat required years of intensive work; it deserves respect.*”

Everyone knows that the USA is the land of research. This offers certain advantages. To achieve the perfect cut of beef, a professor has passed the animal through a type of scanner, thanks to which the muscles



have been analysed millimetre by millimetre. The analysis thus makes it possible to determine the best cut for each piece and to reveal the specific features of each muscle in the animal.

In the United States the fat is different from what we are familiar with in Europe. It is lighter in colour but also has more flavour. For example, the coat of fat covering the sirloin can be used to make a pastry for a tart.

When we asked Jay what his favourite piece was, he immediately answered: the top



blade. Jay cuts it vertically so that the connective tissue appears in the shape of a feather, which is called a *feathersteak* here. This cut can be done in a different way, horizontally, thus eliminating the connective tissue to obtain two slices. “*This cut is not only marvellous braised, it is also an excellent steak, called the flatiron.*”

We could write several reviews to relate our whole American adventure to you. And unfortunately we cannot share with you our savoury experiences in many American restaurants, but one thing is certain: the impression and the memory that we have of it remains unforgettable. We are not thinking just of size and quantity. We met with quality, taste, respect, friendliness and hospitality: significantly more expressive words. American beef is really worth finding out about!



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