

# Biratori Wagyu Cattle

28

Related sheets: 27, 58

## A Wagyu Landscape

In the Shukushubetsu district, there is a 312.5ha town-owned pasture which is maintained to run the town's primary industry of raising Biratori Wagyu cattle (photo 1).

During the months of May to October, these black-haired Wagyu cattle graze in the meadows, which have an acreage roughly equal to 67 Tokyo Domes (139,931 sq.ft x 67). These cattle are then shipped nationwide as high-quality beef that Biratori is proud of.

## The Biratori Wagyu Brand

In the pre-war era, the Shukushubetsu district and the neighboring areas were used to produce war-horses. However, after 1959, this land was converted to pastureland due to a large-scale development and maintenance venture of grassland.

The black-haired Wagyu cattle officially began production in 1962, and it quickly became the main livestock on local pastureland. Once grown, these fattened cattle are shipped to the slaughterhouses or to other markets.

Biratori Wagyu cattle are character-



**Photo 1:** Black-haired Wagyu cattle, grazing in the town-owned pasture (Shukushubetsu district). Because farmers use the rotated grazing method, mass production of Biratori Wagyu is difficult considering the amount of time and effort that goes into such a process.

ized by the way they are raised. Specifically, farmers use a process called the "rotated grazing method (\*1)". The majority of fattened cattle (\*2) are produced in Biratori as well. In order to raise one Biratori Wagyu cattle, it takes about 40 months including the gestation period and a lot of effort.

\*1. With this method, the cattle stay inside the barn during the snowy winter. During the spring, the cattle

graze in the vast pastureland. In the fall, the cattle are brought down to the village. This method of fattening the cattle is commonly used in Tohoku and the Hokkaido regions because it requires rich grasslands that can sustain long-term grazing.

\*2. Cattle that are raised with the sole purpose of eating is called "fattened cattle." On the other hand, cattle raised for the purpose of birthing more calves are called "breeding cattle."

Wagyu is a world-famous beef that Japan takes pride in. These cattle, which were originally used for agricultural purposes, were developed through selective breeding and improvement during the Meiji era. 90% of these Wagyu cattle are black-haired, including the Biratori Wagyu.

The beef is graded based on the standards set by the Japan Meat Grading Association. There are two kinds of classifications: Yield grade (\*3) and Meat Quality (\*4). There are 15 permutations of these levels, and the higher the grade, the better the quality of beef—A-5 being the maximum. The majority of Biratori



**Photo 2:** This is how Biratori Wagyu beef is sold (beef sirloin for sukiyaki). These are shipped nationwide as top quality Wagyu beef.

Wagyu is graded A-5 and is regarded as high-quality meat that woos even the toughest critics with its supreme tenderness and intense flavor (photo 2).

\*3. The meat removed from the animal’s body, free of skin, bones, and organs is called the carcass. The larger the ratio of carcass to bone, the higher the cow is graded. If two cattle weigh the same, the one that has more meat is considered to be better. In this category, there are 3 grades: A, B, and C, with A being the highest.

\*4. Meat quality assesses the following four criteria: fat marbling (level of marbling), color and sheen of the meat, firmness, and texture of the meat (looks), sheen and quality of the fat (with the standard color as white or cream). Based on a comprehensive assessment of these four criteria, the final meat grading is determined. The grade ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 being the best.

In addition, the farmers use the Wagyu to make processed food such as Biratori Wagyu curry and pasta sauce. These products are very popular as gifts that represent this area.

These products can be bought at the Biratori Onsen, supermarkets in and around Biratori, and also online.

Creating Town-owned Pastures

The initiatives to turn pastures to grassland in 1959 and onward was a turning point in the shift from forest grazing to livestock farming. The forest grazing process was mainly used for production of war horses and agricultural horses. We can see the traces of those days in the colonies of Lily of the Valley that is preserved as the town’s natural monument. Back then, one could see the sparse woods with giant Japanese elms and Japanese emperor oaks where the horses would graze freely.

The large scale switch to the grasslands that we can see now was part of the effort to promote livestock production in the post-war era, which is what lead to the development of the Biratori Wagyu brand later on.



Photo 3: A Japanese elm standing in the town-owned pasture (Shukushubetsu area, photo taken from the North). It’s a large tree that adds charm to the local industrial landscape and is also essential for grazing cows as the tree provides shade.

Table 1: The History of Biratori Wagyu Cattle Production

- 1962: For the first time, 54 black-haired Wagyu cattle were brought in from Shimane prefecture.
- 1968: Biratori Beef Cattle Production Promotion Bureau is established.
- 1973: Limited liability corporation, Biratori- Livestock Public Corporation is established. The grand champion of Shimane Prefecture’s stud cattle contest,” Dai-san Takijiri” is brought to Biratori. This stud becomes the base for the current fattening cattle.
- 1978: The corporation changes its name to Biratori Wagyu Breeding and Production Association.
- 1993: 13 Biratori Wagyu cattle are shipped to Tokyo Carcass Market for the first time.

Table 2: The Expansion of Biratori Wagyu Exports in Biratori

Year	Number of Producers	Number of Cattle
1963	13	23
1970	98	619
1975	107	1,321
1978	99	1,642
1991	80	2,220
1999	60	3,590

The large trees unique to the Shukushubetsu district were intentionally left behind to be used as shade for the cattle (photo 3). These giant, isolated trees stand out beautifully, especially against the background of grassland, the sky, and the rock cliff, free of any man-made architecture. The picturesque landscape with the Wagyu cattle resting and snuggling up with each other

creates quite a calming landscape.

“Cultural landscapes of the Saru Valley formed by Ainu tradition and modern development”  
Designated as Important Cultural Landscape as of July 26th, 2007

For Inquiries  
Regarding the Landscape of Ainu Culture  
Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum  
Nibutani 55, Biratori-Cho, Saru-Gun,  
Hokkaido, 055-0101 Japan  
Phone: +81-1457-2-2892  
Fax: +81-1457-2-2828  
Published: June, 2014