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[Behind the Beef: Kobe or Wagyu?](#)

In *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare famously asks, “What’s in a name?” Well, if you’re talking about beef, the answer is easy: Everything.



“That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” writes the famed playwright. Had he been talking about steak, however — especially the Japanese variety — he might have changed his mind.

Sure, what we call Kobe beef by any other name would probably taste just as sweet, but without the word *Kobe* we wouldn’t know how to order it. Kobe beef on a menu would sound just like any other variety of beef — and Kobe beef is *not* just like any other variety of beef.

For that reason, we’ve got a beef with Japanese beef. Well, not with the beef — we love the beef — but rather with the American words for describing it.

On a typical American restaurant menu, you’ll likely see two words used interchangeably to describe Japanese-style beef: *Kobe* and *Wagyu*. While both are delicious, they’re not necessarily the same thing — and it’s time to set the record straight for carnivorous, Kobe-craving foodies everywhere.

Before you can understand what Kobe beef is, you’ve got to understand what Wagyu beef is, which is beef — generally — from Japanese cows. In fact, the term *Wagyu* simply means Japanese (Wa) cattle (gyu). For that reason, several other, non-Kobe varieties of beef can also be called Wagyu.

Of course, Japanese cows aren't identical to American cows. Although they may look the same to the untrained eye, their insides really are different. Raised over several centuries on different terrain and eating a different diet than American cows, Japanese cattle produce beef that's uniquely marbled with fat, which makes Wagyu beef especially flavorful, tender and juicy.

So, what's Kobe, then? Well, there are actually four major breeds of Japanese cow, or Wagyu. Kobe — a black-haired variety — happens to be just one of them. All Kobe beef is therefore Wagyu, but not all Wagyu beef is Kobe.

Just like authentic Champagne must come from the Champagne region of France, authentic Kobe beef must come from Hyogo Prefecture, Japan. Champagne from anywhere else is just sparkling wine, connoisseurs insist, and Kobe beef from anywhere else is just "Kobe-style" beef, or Tajimi-ushi - which refers to the type of black-haired cattle raised for both Kobe and Kobe-style beef.

The reason is more than just semantics. It's historical, too, as volumes have been written about the history of cattle in Japan, where eating four-legged animals was once outlawed due to the nation's Buddhist belief system.

Eating beef became popular — and legal — again during the Meiji Restoration (1867-1912), when Emperor Meiji attempted to bring more Western influence into Japan. By the mid-20th century, Kobe beef had become popular as a prized but rare delicacy in Japan, which lacks a lot of land for grazing animals. Kobe must therefore be raised in very limited numbers and under very specialized conditions.

Which leads us to what really separates authentic Japanese Kobe from other varieties of Wagyu, including the American version: To this day, black Kobe cows often have their own little homes and are fed a carefully guarded diet that almost certainly includes barley, wheat, corn and — eventually — beer. Some purveyors even massage their cows with Sake based on the belief that a soft, gentle coat produces a finer, more delicate meat. Because of how they're fed and cared for, true Kobe beef in Japan can therefore fetch up to \$400 per pound.

Here in the United States, true Kobe beef is very hard to come by. When you see it on a U.S. restaurant menu, therefore, you'll most likely be eating a *Kobe-style* (a.k.a. Wagyu or Tajima) steak, instead. While it's no less delicious — and no less expensive, at between \$50 and over \$150 per pound — it's worth knowing the difference, in case you ever get the chance to taste the real deal.

Whether you're eating real Kobe or American Tajima, be sure that your meat's prepared properly. No matter how you usually prefer your steak, marbled meat like Kobe is best served rare or medium rare, which preserves the flavors of the tender meat tucked in between those thick marbled layers of melted fat. Kobe-style beef differs so much from even the finest prime cuts in the United States that it's almost always best to have it prepared by a chef with expert knowledge of this Japanese delicacy.

What's in a name, Shakespeare? If your steak costs more than your monthly car payment, the answer is, "a lot!"

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