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GREAT EATS AND STAYS FROM **20 INSIDERS**



Raising the steaks

Just what does it take to rear the best cattle so consumers can get a succulent slab of well-marbled steak? Adeline Wong goes on a pasture-to-plate journey to the Northern Territory in search of the tastiest beef.

The sprawling landscape of Labelle Downs Station, which like Brunette Downs and all the other AACo cattle stations form almost one percent of Australia's land mass.



Over black coffee served out from a red Catalina picnic basket on the back of his four-wheel drive, Clint Ashbacher is talking about the cattle that roam Wylarah Station, 15km from Surat, Queensland. "Every single bull born at Wylarah Station is raised on open pastures," he says proudly. "We now have 4,200 full-blood females and the aim is to reach 5,000."

The cattle Ashbacher refers to are Westholme Wagyu and it's no ordinary herd. The Australian Agricultural Company (AACo), Australia's oldest continuously operating company, bought the Westholme Stud in 2006; its genetics originating from the most highly credentialed full-blood Black Wagyu to have left Japan.

Wearing just a light blue long sleeved shirt, straight cut jeans and a wide brim straw hat, the station manager is unfazed by the nine-degree cold snap that is hitting Surat this morning. Neither are his guests – Malcolm Lee, chef-owner of one Michelin-starred restaurant Candelnut; Drew Nocente, executive chef of Salted & Hung; Lino Sauro, chef-partner of Gattopardo Ristorante di Mare; Terry Farrell, brand ambassador and regional sales manager of

AACo; and Sharon Ng, corporate marketing manager of Culina. All of them have just flown in from Archerfield, Queensland, on an AACo owned aircraft, The Pilatus PC-12, for one purpose: to understand how Westholme and Wylarah cattle, two of the premium beef brands marketed by AACo and distributed exclusively by Culina in Singapore since last October, are being raised.

Cattle dynamics

We are in the Australian outback with no dwelling in plain sight. It's not surprising when you consider the fact that Wylarah spans 32,600 hectares and Surat is home to around 400 residents. Wylarah Station's environment consists of a mix of alluvial flood plains, woodlands and grasslands, with the Balonne River as its major watercourse. It's one of many cattle properties that AACo owns.

We expect to see the cattle easily, but as Ashbacher drives us around in his 4WD over miles of semi-arid pastures, it's clear just



A helicopter ride to get a bird's eye view of Brunette Downs Station

how sparse the land is. The animals are all dispersed, giving true meaning to the term free range. And then we eye them minutes later. More than 10m away from us, a small herd is grazing languidly in the cool weather. The cattle sport different coloured tags – some purple, others orange – on their ears. This, Ashbacher points out, is done in order to identify their age.

Raising cattle is a mammoth operation, one undertaken by the farming families that steward the land, but we are getting a glimpse of how laborious the process is. From around three months of age, each animal in the Westholme Wagyu herd is electronically tagged to ensure lifetime traceability. Any vaccination, information about its pedigree and weight history is recorded. "Each is vaccinated for optimum health at between three and five months, once again at six to eight months, and annually after that. We have contract vets to oversee the artificial insemination programme and specialised nutritionists who visit our feedlots every two weeks," Ashbacher shares.

When the bulls turn two, they go through a breeding programme where their semen is stored and frozen in a straw. The potential to multiply high quality genetics through this process is great, says Ashbacher, as one bull can generate up to 200 straws of semen. The bulls are transported to AACo's Barkly Tablelands stations such as Brunette Downs, where they are



Clint Ashbacher playing host to chefs Lino Sauro, Drew Nocente and Malcolm Lee

bred to females to produce calves that enter the Westholme and Wylarah branded beef programs. These calves are raised on their mothers before grazing on native Mitchell grass for 18 months. Thereafter, the cattle are sent to be finished on a grain-based diet which produces the rich marbling throughout the cut that these brands are famous for.

By the time they are ready to be processed at around two-and-a-half years old, their average weight would be about 420kg. Cattle eat two to three percent of their body weight in dry matter each day so a lot of investment goes into providing the best nutrition possible to ensure that rich marbling. The herd feed on native and improved grass species. Over winter, the pasture is often supplemented with fodder crops grown on the station such as maize, barley, oats, lablab and millet. Mineral lick blocks are supplied to give cattle access to trace minerals.

Only when the cattle are processed will the grading assessment be done to determine the cuts that become Westholme and Wylarah. Every purchase of Wylarah beef comes with special packaging and a hand-signed certificate from AACo's managing director Jason Strong.

As we set off for the next station visit, Farrell shares that Lee, Nocente and Sauro will be preparing a scrumptious Wagyu cookout the following night at Brunette Downs Station. The news is honey to the ears after a long day in the outback.

Pastoral haven

Our journey also takes us to Delamere, Labelle Downs and Brunette Downs stations, but the latter leaves the most lasting impression. If Wylarah station is big, Brunette Downs Station – at 12,000 sq km and three million acres – is unimaginably huge.

Steering the business

Jason Strong, managing director and chief executive officer of AACo, is a man with a mission – to lead the continual transformation of AACo into a premium brand beef business.



As managing director & chief executive officer of AACo since January 2014, what developments and changes have taken place since you came on board?

AACo has been on a journey to transform the company from a production focused business to one that delivers the highest quality branded beef to the most

discerning customers around the world. The journey culminated with the launch of Westholme and Wylarah in Singapore in 2016. We are now a company that is steeped in history and heritage but focused on integrated supply chains, investing in innovation, technology, branding and marketing.

How do you plan to lead the company in the next three to five years?

The focus for AACo now is growth from the execution of our

strategy. Rolling out the new brand program globally, improving the efficiency of our supply chains and implementing the results of our investments in innovation and technology.

How many Westholme cattle are there now and how has the branded beef business grown?

The Westholme herd is the core of all our Wagyu genetics. There are now over 100,000 cattle in the Wagyu supply chain, making up 18.5 percent of the total AACo herd. The growth in the amount of Wagyu genetics in the AACo herd has been one of the big drivers of the increase in our branded beef program. In the last four years beef sales as a percentage of total company revenue has grown from less than 50 to 85 percent.

What is the Singapore market and consumer palate like when it comes to beef consumption? What is the appeal of Westholme and Wylarah among consumers here?

Singapore is a very diverse market with a full range of cuisines from local through to most international options. The local and international business and tourism customers create a wide range of demands for food and particularly beef. They are very discerning and have the highest expectation of the food they consume. The appeal of Westholme and Wylarah beef is the creation of a fantastic eating experience from the most juicy, tender, flavourful beef that connects you back to the history and heritage of AACo and Australia.

Lastly, what is your favourite cut of beef?

Westholme Oyster Blade, slow-roasted all day.



A visit to Delamere station, an AACo property located in the Victoria River district and south of Darwin

The area is so isolated the nearest service centre on Mount Isa is 600km away and the closest spot to enjoy some fresh seafood is at King Ash Bay, a four-and-a-half-hour drive away. It's the single biggest pastoral station of the Northern Territory. In fact, AACo owns almost one percent of Australia's land mass. (That's almost seven million hectares of land.) Led by regional manager Barkly, Michael Johnson, along with 45 to 50 station employees, look after 50 paddocks and a total of 85,000 cattle. The latter is a mix of Wagyu as well as the AACo Composite, a breed developed by AACo to specifically suit the northern Australian climate and produce great quality beef.

The scale of Brunette Downs Station is so big, we are ushered into a waiting helicopter to view the landscape. It's a jaw-dropping 45-minute ride. From above, endless green pastures surround cobalt green streams, while hundreds of pelicans fly



Michael Johnson holding a bunch of verbine, which provides feed for the cattle at Brunette Downs Station

above the waters. Unsurprisingly, we spot the cattle only much later, grazing along the dry areas in a neat file.

"We have to move the cattle to high areas when it floods," explains Johnson. Once the lake dries up, it leaves behind a native legume species called verbine, which is fantastic cattle feed. We muster the cattle twice a year for their weight and other details to be measured, and for their calves to be weaned."

The big cookout

Having visited the two stations, everyone is clearly hankering for some delicious beef. Back at the Johnsons' homestead, the kitchen

turns into a hive of activity as Sauro, Lee and Nocente take turns at the stove to get tonight's dinner ready for the Johnsons and some of Brunette Downs Station's employees. Farrell has brought along beautiful hunks of Wylarah Wagyu beef for the chefs. Sauro declares that he is whipping up what he cheekily calls the 'Brunette Downs' Wagyu Beef Salad. Everyone's eyes lit up when Nocente announces that he is making a Wagyu 'butter', plus a messy kiwi and strawberry pavlova for dessert. "All the trimmings from the Wagyu will be rendered down with honey, garlic, onions for 20 minutes, set and whipped like butter," he explains.

But it's Lee's secret weapon that the Brunette Downs' staffers are most curious about – naturally, none of them has heard of buah keluak fried rice. Lee has clearly come prepared, having dug out the flesh from the Asian black nuts (50 to be exact) in Singapore and brought it along for the cookout. The special ingredient will be fried with rice, chilli, garlic, oyster sauce, shrimp paste, Wagyu beef fat and beef cubes.

The synergy and ease of preparation are evident, especially as the chefs already have experience cooking with Westholme and Wylarah beef in their own restaurants. Nocente loves using Westholme flank for Salted & Hung's tasting and lunch menus. Sauro shares that while Gattopardo may be a seafood-focused establishment, one of his most popular dishes is still the Char-grilled Westholme Wagyu Beef Hanging Tender. There's no complexity to it: hanging tender with its fats and nerves trimmed, is grilled with corn and served with beef jus made from hanging tender fat and beef bones. He enthuses: "I can serve the best sashimi, but people go nuts for this dish as it's so juicy and tender. Out of 50 diners, 20 of them will ask for the hanging tender. I'm really happy to be on this trip as I can now show my customers

'Brunette Downs' Wagyu Beef Salad

Serves 10

Prep time 15 minutes

Cook time 3 minutes

400g purple onions, diced
400g red peppers, diced
20g garlic
300g crunchy romaine lettuce
200g raw fresh spinach
1kg Westholme or Wylarah Wagyu ribeye cap, trimmed (available from Culina)
dash of Cognac

vinaigrette

60ml extra virgin olive oil
20ml balsamic vinegar

Craving for more beef? We got chef-partner of Gattopardo Ristorante di Mare, Lino Sauro, to share his Wagyu beef salad recipe, a tribute to his cookout at Brunettes Down Station.



where Westholme and Wylarah beef come from and how the cows are raised and treated.”

The Johnsons are visibly pleased at the welcome disruption to their daily routine and Amanda potters around pouring wine all around to make everyone comfortable. Plates and cutlery are set out at the backyard and Nocente is doing double duty at the barbecue, expertly firing up thick slabs of Wylarah Wagyu beef.

The Peranakan fried rice is declared a stunner around the table. It's savoury, salty, sweet all at once and the fragrant rice is perfectly moist, thanks to copious amounts of beef fat. Lee lets on that he's constantly experimenting with new dishes to excite his diners and kitchen brigade. He's done Westholme flank steak wok-fried with dried shrimps, laksa leaves and lemongrass as well as Wylarah striploin grilled over charcoal and served with ikan bilis, green mango sambal, red onions and ginger flower for his previous menu. His next challenge is to use beef tongue. “Although Candlenut is an Asian restaurant, using good quality beef really helps with the texture of the dishes.”

No one can argue with that. e



(left)
Amanda
and Michael
Johnson with
their children
Matilda, William
and Lachlan

(bottom)
Malcolm Lee
preparing buah
keluak fried rice

20g mustard

- Stir-fry onions with red peppers and garlic until soft.
- In a shallow pan, add Wagyu, sauté and flambé with Cognac for about 2 minutes.
- Mix ingredients for the vinaigrette. Toss romaine lettuce, spinach leaves and vinaigrette together. On a plate, add the greens. Top with Wagyu and serve.



All smiles and laughter during the
cookout

Drew Nocente fires up an Aussie-
style barbecue.

