

How does beef achieve A5 status?

It's rare for Japanese beef to attain A5. And when it does, it's not sold in grocery stores, although you will find it at upscale department stores. Most often, beef that's *this* high quality is given as a gift, or enjoyed on very special occasions. In fact, in Japan, it would be uncommon to eat A5 Wagyu more than once every few years.

The rating system is alphanumeric, which means it consists of a letter and a number.

The letter represents yield quality, which means how much usable meat was on the animal. "A" is superior, "B" is average, and "C" is inferior. "A" here means the cow gave an exceptionally high yield of usable meat.

The number, between 1 and 5, represents where the quality falls based on several characteristics, including marbling level, but marbling isn't the only thing that counts. The number awarded to the animal also considers the color of the meat, the fat, and how even its distribution is. The most important digits to remember are "5," which means "superior," and "3," which means "conforming to standards."

The nice thing about the Japanese beef-rating system is that the alphanumeric standards are completely universal no matter who you get your beef from. That's because the Japanese take rating their meat very seriously.

The graders, who have the important task of assigning the letters and numbers, must train for 2-3 years before they are considered proficient in rating Japanese Wagyu. Three expert graders rate each beef, and their scores are combined to give the final rating. No pressure, cow. When an animal gets rated A5, it's a big deal, and the highest honor.

Remember how the number in the alphanumeric rating (in this case, A**5**), represents quality for multiple beef traits? Well, one of those traits is marbling, which is rated on a separate rating system, the Beef Marbling Standard (BMS), first, before being "converted," to the 1-5 numbering system. The BMS standard goes from 1 (lowest) to 12 (highest). Beef that scores from 8 to 12 on the BMS scale qualifies as A5.

To put the Japanese process in context, America's USDA has a grading system with levels Select, Choice, and Prime. And according to studies, Angus beef averages a BMS score of 2 and cannot achieve a BMS greater than 5 (remember, that's out of 12 on the scale). Thus, Japanese A5 Wagyu is quite literally "off the charts" compared to American beef.

The answer lies primarily in the genetics. There are 4 native breeds of Wagyu in Japan, and one of those, *Kuroge Washu*, has a genetic predisposition to fine-grained, intramuscular marbling.

Other factors include the animal's diet and stress levels -- the lower the stress, the finer the marbling.

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