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The flavour of the land

Neil Prentice's wagyu beef tastes of where it was raised, writes **Richard Cornish**.

A HERD of short, fat black cows grazes by a vineyard in the hills. The cattle are wagyu and the vines in the vineyard produce pinot noir grapes. This is Neil Prentice's parents' farm at Moondarra, overlooking the Latrobe Valley towards Warragul. Here, Prentice raises full-blood Tajima wagyu, a line of the Japanese beef cattle renowned for their ability to produce vast amounts of marbling, the pale interlaced fat that sits between the deep red of the muscles.

Prentice sets himself apart from the majority of wagyu producers in the nation by raising and fattening his animals in the paddocks in which they were born; most of the wagyu produced in Australia is fattened in feedlots. The end result for Prentice's wagyu beef is that although it doesn't reach the astronomically high fat scores, it averages about seven and "is meat that tastes of somewhere", he says. "In France they call the distinctive taste that the wine and food of a particular region has 'goutte de terroir'."

Moondarra wagyu has a distinctive mineral taste, bordering on ferrous, a characteristic Prentice attributes to the iron content of the rich, red volcanic soil on which the cattle's feed grows. His pinot noir is earthy, very gamey, bordering on funky, with the same mineral element as the beef.

His parents bought the farm in the early 1990s. "They were originally from Gippsland, were living in the city and wanted to get back to the land," he says. "They bought this 100-hectare farm and were fattening English breeds for the market, but the returns were not great. I knew that I could sell a line of branded beef that reflected the flavour of the

country they were growing [in], and get a premium."

However, he couldn't compete with the quality of local beef from butchers sourcing British breeds grazing on the lush grass.

"Also, people in the city at that time were being convinced that the grain-fed beef with the texture of baby food that tasted of nothing was the real deal," he says. "So I set out to create tender meat that tasted of where it came from, that, perhaps, people would enjoy with the pinot noir I was growing on mum and dad's block."

Prentice and his family invested in a wagyu herd, a novelty breed at that time, initially by buying cows that had been impregnated with wagyu embryos. The original bloodline came from the US, the result of three bulls' semen, the progeny of which was crossed over and over with the semen from another of the bulls to create a line of cattle that was almost 100 per cent wagyu. It was called American pure-bred.

"The first calf hit the ground in 1994, and from her we slaughtered our first pure-bred steer in 1998," Prentice says. "Shannon Bennett and Andrew McConnell took most of the first carcass. It was better than anything we had tasted here before."

Then something amazing happened: full-blood genetics from the Tajima wagyu line were smuggled out of Japan. "Culturally, that was an act so traitorous that there was no Japanese law against it," Prentice says.

Initially, Prentice raised his animals for 600 days on grain. "The marble scores were off the scale," he says. "But the meat didn't taste like it was from anywhere. The muscle had no flavour and was the texture of baby food again." It was at that point

that he changed his feed regime and developed his grass-fed program. The females are paired with bulls when they are 18 months old — relatively old in the beef world. The animals are allowed to suckle until 10 months — again, a long time in beef production. From then until two years old they are allowed to graze naturally and feed on silage — fermented hay, which is easier to digest and helps the animals gain weight more rapidly.

Between the ages of two and three, the animals are fed hay; silage tends to make the fat too yellow. The animals are slaughtered at a minimum of three years and then dry-aged for 28 days.

"The Tajima line are slow-growing but most flavoursome," Prentice says, "a bit like we're trying to achieve with our pinot noir — slow-growing, smaller yields and maximum flavour."

Moondarra wagyu is served in Melbourne establishments such as Kitchen Cat, Earl Canteen and North Melbourne's Libertine. The latter's chef, Andre de Laine, has a \$36 main-course policy and has Moondarra wagyu steak on the menu every night. It could be rump, strip loin or flank, the portion size adjusted according to the value of the cut. This is served with a parcel of wagyu rib meat and sweetbreads cooked down with tarragon and shallots, and jus.

"Mum and dad can make a living off the farm," Prentice says. "We've had income to fence off the creek — the spiny crayfish are back, and in the windbreak where we have planted 10,000 trees, the antechinus are in the undergrowth and feather-tailed gliders are back in the old trees. It's been bloody worth it."



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To buy Moondarra wagyu, contact Gamekeepers at gamekeepersmeat.com.au. For more information on Moondarra, see moondarra.com.au.



Moondarra wagyu has a distinctive minerally taste.



Neil Prentice shows off the marbled beef produced by the Tajima wagyu cattle he raises at Moondarra, overlooking the Latrobe Valley, near Warragul.

PICTURES: RICHARD CORNISH