

Growing Grass Fed Beef in Australia

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There are three categories of grass fed beef:

1. THE VEALER

Probably the most popular with local trade butchers because one man shops find it much easier to control the standard of their meat - young beef is always tender and the colour is also always bright.

A true vealer is still suckling on its mother, and ranges in weight from 240 to 350kg. Capital city people and major supermarket chains buy mostly on colour and the younger an animal the brighter the colour.

This sort of beef generally does not have much flavour but its tenderness and juiciness makes it a popular and safe purchase.

The best vealers in Australia are generally from a first cross cow, probably a beef X dairy animal which produces more milk. The terminal sire is generally a British or European breed bull.

Vealer production is generally undertaken in the higher rainfall areas of Eastern Australia and in irrigated areas. Many producers are specialist growers, often with many years experience.

Vealers bring the highest price in the market, especially in drought times. Good conditions are vital for vealer production. The majority of vealers are finished and sold in late spring, taking advantage of the abundance of high protein grasses (clovers, rye grass and cocksfoot) in spring.

2. DOMESTIC TRADE OR KOREAN STEERS.

The majority of domestic trade cattle are in the weight range of 400 to 500kgs when sold - at probably 18 to 20 months old. As a general rule, to optimise the price, the animal should still have its milk teeth.

These cattle are weaned at an age when they are not fat - at about 250kg and also are fattened through the lush pastures of spring to be sold. Because of the additional time available Domestic trade animals can be produced in ' more marginal country, perhaps on a property with wheat and sheep. In good years, many domestic trade animals come from the northern NSW and Southern Queensland areas offgrass.

The meat of these cattle has much more flavour and is not so bright in colour and is preferred by restaurants and hotels. The fat colour is generally white. This style of meat is what Australia is best known for - discerning consumers often prefer the flavour of grass fed beef. The Korean market also prefers this weight range of animal.

The fat range of a Domestic trade beast is 7 to 11 millimetres. In dry times such as the present drought these cattle are being supplementary fed on grain and hay and are being weaned at lighter weights - less than 200 kgs. This type of beef is becoming more marketable because the killing charge is the same for smaller lighter weight vealers as for the domestic trade cattle.

Domestic and Korean trade cattle are sourced from most breeds in Australia including *Bos Indicus* in the north. British breeds and their crosses are probably the most sought after because of their tenderness.

3. BULLOCK OR JAPANESE TRADE

In the weight range of 500 to 700kgs, with two to six teeth, Japanese bullocks are often almost three years old at sale.

These cattle are generally run on the best pastures in most states of Australia. In the south they are mainly made up of British breeds and their crosses and in the northern areas they are mainly *Bos Indicus* breeds and their crosses.

The British breeds are most sought because of their marbling - Angus, Murray Grey, Galloway and Shorthorn are the known four breeds which marble their meat. Most of these cattle are purchased at two years old by "the fatteners" - farmers with excellent pastures and fattening crops including oats, sorghums, millet and other summer growing pastures. Some are also fattened off turnips.

This enterprise is mainly confined to Gippsland and northern Victoria.

Many fatteners go long distances to purchase their cattle. These cattle carry a fat depth between 12 and 20 mm, but we do find a lot of variability with many of the cattle falling outside this range.

The cattle that do not fit the classification generally find their way into the US hamburger trade while the good cattle go to the lucrative Japanese market. This trade has increased dramatically over the past five years because the Japanese prefer high marbling in their beef. If not fattened on grass, these cattle go into a long period in a feedlot (180 to 350 days), and because of the present drought the feedlots are finding it a costly enterprise because of high feed costs.

I believe if good seasons return we will see in the short a change to increased numbers of bullocks or Japanese trade cattle produced from grass. Feed costs will remain high for a time and not allow an adequate profit margin in feedlots.

This class of cattle can be hung for much longer periods than the above classes because of their fat cover.

In addition, grass fed beef has a longer shelf life than grain fed feed.

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