

Former Novato Couple Turns Pampered Pastures into Gourmet Beef



A Scottish Highland bull trots down from the hills to eat at Springhill Ranch north of Novato while a Wagyu cow and her calf feed from the trough at top. The Londons feed their pampered cattle hay, corn and alfalfa, along with barley and grains from San Rafael's Broken Drum Brewery. They're also served spring water from elevated buckets to keep them from getting their legs wet. Cattle are pampered at 138-acre Springhill Ranch and Vineyard between Petaluma and Novato. Former Novato residents Chris and Karen London run Springhill.

Springhill Ranch looks like a golf course. There's not a weed in sight on its green, perfectly manicured hills, not a speck of mud, and certainly no flies. It's not until owner Karen London appears on her ATV - followed by an excited herd of mooing cattle - that it becomes clear that Springhill's immaculate fields are actually a cow pasture.

"Our vet joked once that he'd like to come back as one of our cows in his next life," said Chris London, Karen's husband and co-owner of the ranch just north of the Marin County line. "He calls this a country club for cows."

Springhill is the only ranch in the Bay Area to raise full-blooded Wagyu cattle, a family of Japanese breeds that produce, among others, Kobe beef. Fans of Kobe - and there are many - say its fame comes both from its pampered cattle and the rich, well-marbled succulent beef they produce.

"There are all kinds of myths and stories around Kobe bulls, which are basically fed beer and massaged," said chef Robert Price, whose Kobe cheeseburger has won acclaim for Mill Valley's Bungalow 44 restaurant. "Kobe is so good because its high marbling results in a tender beef with an amazing flavor that's also a lot more expensive."

The Londons can't call the beef they sell "Kobe" - as with champagne, the name is jealously guarded by producers from a particular region. But they're quick to point out that their herd of 10 Wagyu cattle, with documented pedigrees going back 40 generations, are a far cry from the "American

Kobe" beef sold at many U.S. butcher shops, which is often the result of a Wagyu-Angus hybrid.

"Angus is not bad," said Chris London, who has a few Angus cows of his own. "But it's not Kobe."

London, who works full-time as

a United Airlines pilot, has learned quite a bit about the ways of cows since purchasing the first 51 acres of Springhill in 1999. The couple, who lived in Novato's Pacheco Valle until 2008, had relatively little experience on a farm until they owned one.

"I had worked for ranchers in Maryland and Pennsylvania," said Chris London, who grew up in Virginia. "Karen had mowed her parents' grass. But she's always been an outdoor lady."

The Londons contacted a farm adviser at the University of California Cooperative Extension, who suggested that the ranch's relatively cool climate would be perfect for growing potatoes.

That wasn't what Chris London wanted to hear. "For the price we paid for these lots," he said, "they'd have to be extremely expensive potatoes."

Convinced that the property - now 138 acres - could support wine grapes, the couple enrolled in farm-



Chris and Karen London raise high-quality beef on their ranch between Novato and Petaluma using two breeds of cattle, Scottish Highland and Wagyu. Karen holds an ear tag that contains a number that is unique to each cow. Meticulous records are kept concerning when the animal was born, where it lives, who its parents are and what it eats.

ing and viticulture classes with the University of California at Davis and Santa Rosa Junior College. The ranch's vineyards now supply five local vineyards with pinot noir grapes.

The couple also looked into breeds of livestock whose sale would justify the relatively high cost of operating a Bay Area ranch - and whose meat would satisfy a Bay Area palate.

"We're not going to be able to compete with ranches in the Midwest and other areas where the costs of feed and land are much lower," Chris London said. "When we were looking at this area, we saw that people were interested in how healthy their food was, and that led us to the Scottish highland cow and the Wagyu."

Long-horned and long-haired, with shaggy brown, yellow, red or white coats that make them look like Chewbacca, highland cows don't need extra fat to keep them warm in winter, resulting in beef that's exceptionally lean, Chris London said.

"It's leaner than cod or venison, with half the grams of fat of chicken," said London, who believes "beef" and "good for you" are not mutually exclusive terms. "If you want beef, you want healthy beef, not hormones or steroids."

But don't take his word for it. To prove to his customers that the meat

he sells is free from antibiotics, hormones, genetically modified crops or other additives, London keeps careful records of every aspect of his cows' lives. A third-party verification service uses radio tags in the animals' ears to track the age and location of each cow, and his feed suppliers provide letters guaranteeing their all-natural diet.

The Londons' cows receive daily meals of fresh hay, corn and alfalfa, as well as the occasional malted barley and grains provided by San Rafael's Broken Drum Brewery. They drink spring water from containers placed atop redwood pads - to keep the animals from getting wet or muddy legs - and they're frequently checked to make sure they're healthy, free of parasites, and as happy as the Londons can make them.

"Good meat requires that you put good stuff into it," Chris London said.

London believes the quality of an animal's life determines the quality of its meat. He is currently seeking certification that his cows are humanely raised and handled. The animals are slaughtered on the ranch, giving them a peaceful existence up until the last moment, London said.

"While they're here, these animals deserve to be humanely treated," he

said. "Most ranches have barbed-wire fences and electric prods. We won't have one on the ranch."

The Londons don't advertise the sale of their beef. There's no mention of the word "Wagyu" on their Web site, and most of their customers hear about the ranch through word of mouth, Karen London said.

"We encourage people to buy the whole cow," said London, who has priced beef as low as \$5 a pound to those willing to purchase a 700-pound animal; Wagyu beef regularly costs as much as \$50 a pound. "That way we can try to keep it affordable. It's not priced for the elite."

The lengths to which they pamper their cattle have earned the Londons a few strange looks from their neighbors and fellow ranchers, said Chris London. But many of those neighbors gained a better understanding of the ranch after sampling a Wagyu or highland steak, he said. As for the couple themselves, who moved to Petaluma to be closer to the ranch, what began as a business venture has become a passion.

"Karen takes the care of these animals real seriously," Chris London said. "There's a lot of pride in raising these animals."



Chris and Karen London, who raise high quality beef on their ranch north of Novato using two breeds of cattle, Scottish Highland and Wagyu, sit among the feeding animals.