

→ How this tiny New Zealand company is producing the best beef in the World



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Travel

With wellness on the tips of everyone's lips, seeking the best ingredients available – turns out, there's truth to the adage “you are what you eat” – has never been a greater priority. While picking plum produce is fairly straightforward, making educated decisions about beef, unfortunately, isn't so cut and dry. And here in the United States – where the average American was expected to down over a record-breaking 222 pounds of meat (including beef) in 2018 – it can be downright confusing.

Need proof? Head to the produce aisle of your favorite grocery store, pick up any vegetable or fruit, and look for its sticker. From the printed PLU (price look-up) code, you can quickly spot how it was grown. (For example: organic produce is identified by a five digit code starting with 9, while genetically-modified produce is marked by a five digit code beginning with 8.) On top of that, most retailers will

also indicate origins, so you know if it's from a local farm or has been flown in from overseas.

Now, head to the meat section. Whether you're looking at pre-packaged cuts or your butcher's case, there's far more language to sift through. Even the most informed epicureans can find it difficult deciphering what words like natural, grass-fed, and organic really mean.

American consumption of beef shows no signs of slowing, but there's a dark side to the story: the conventional, readily available stuff comes at a high price to most everyone (animals, farmers, environment, consumers) except for the guys at the top of the pyramid. For decades, the American beef industry has sacrificed quality, sustainability, and yes, compassion – I'm of the belief if you're going to eat anything with a heartbeat, raise it humanely as possible – to pump up production and profits.

That's when First Light enters the picture. Founded in 2003 by Gerard Hickey, Jason Ross, and Greg Evans, the New Zealand-based company specializing in grass-fed Wagyu is disrupting the American beef industry with a transparent business model and a simple goal. “We lead by example, from end to end, to provide the best beef in the world,” says Ross. It's an extremely tall order, but something this intrepid company of 30 is staunchly dedicated to – even if it means going up against Big Beef in America.

It begins with overhauling the entire process by being, in Ross' words, “ruthlessly efficient.” Hickey adds, “There's far too many middle men in this business. If you don't add any value, then we don't need you.” Trimming what isn't vital in the supply chain has helped cast a more human side to the company by giving First Light farmers the power to



First Light Farms decided to specialize in wagyu beef for its exceptional marbling and subtly nutty and sweet flavor



New Zealand-based First Light Farms is the first company in the world to specialize in grass-fed, wagyu beef.

develop closer, more direct relationships with their consumers. “We even promote our farmers on our website, so they feel like they’re part of a family,” explains Hickey. “They really care about what they do; in turn, we reward them with consumers that care.”

Because First Light is structured as a cooperative, the farmers also serve as part owners – giving them as much incentive as the founders to produce the best beef possible. “I see them as the next big meat company, that’s why I’m with them,” says Duncan Holden, owner of Forest Gate Farming in Central Hawke’s Bay. “They’re going to be the leader in getting farmers back on track.”

It’s reassuring to know First Light is being run ethically and equitably on the back end, but how are their cows being treated? And just as important: how does the beef taste? As grass-fed Wagyu is the company’s specialty – First Light’s other offering is farm-raised venison – you need to understand what grass-fed and Wagyu mean, especially since the terms are routinely bandied about in the world of nutrition and food.

When American beef is marked as grass-fed or grass-finished, it could mean what you’d imagine in a perfect scenario: a relaxed cow roaming freely, contently munching away on a pasture. While it can be that, sadly in most cases it’s not. Because the terms grass-fed and grass-finished aren’t policed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture or any sort of auditing agency, cows can be, as reported by a colleague early last year, fed grass pellets while in feedlots or released on pastures for just a few weeks – and still get the grass-associated labels. The organic designation, too, can be

problematic. While the animals are required to spend some time on pasture (again, that could mean a few weeks), they’re still allowed to be fed corn and other grains (they just have to be organic).

But in the case of First Light, grass-fed means exactly what you hope for: all their cows roam freely on pasture from the time they are weaned from their mothers until slaughter, and strictly feed on New Zealand’s naturally lush, verdant, and nutrient-rich land – which has never been genetically modified (non-GMO). It also means the animals aren’t ever confined to feedlots, or treated with antibiotics or growth hormones. “We give our cattle the best possible life,” says Hickey. “We see ourselves as animal welfare advocates,



Because First Light is structured as a cooperative, the farmers also serve as part owners. Pictured above are animals from Forest Gate Farming in Central Hawke’s Bay, owned by Duncan Holden.



All of First Light's animals freely roam and feed on New Zealand's naturally lush and nutrient-rich grass from the time they are weaned from their mothers until slaughter.

because in the end, a happy animal will produce the best beef.” Taking care of the animals is such a priority for First Light they’re the first New Zealand company to earn the internationally recognized Certified Humane® status. While clearly, grass-fed is better for the animal, farmer, and environment than conventional, there’s a catch: the meat is typically leaner, which doesn’t score so well in the flavor department.

What does? Wagyu. Originating from Japan and mind-bendingly marbled – marbling refers to intramuscular fat – it’s widely

regarded the gold standard when it comes to flavor. But again, there’s a catch. Because of years of breeding, the animals were better suited for feeding off grain, than grass. To remedy that, First Light spent nearly a decade cross-breeding Wagyu bulls with the best New Zealand cows until they hit their sweet spot: mild-mannered animals that are only fed on grass, comfortably grow to a manageable size, and consistently yield gorgeously marbled meat that’s subtly and equally sweet, nutty, and rich. The taste is so uniquely robust, yet clean (with no waxy or greasy mouthfeel), First Light earned a coveted gold medal for its ribeye in the 2018 World Steak Challenge.

As to be expected with any naturally-raised product, though, there’s a spectrum. And here, it boils down to the intensity of marbling. To that end, First Light has adopted a scale ranging from 2 (the leanest) to 9 (the richest). Because First Light’s baseline standards are far superior to what you’ve probably been eating, you’ll discover even the leanest cuts are downright delicious and deeply satisfying. (And if you’re lucky enough to come across a chop with a marbling score of 7 or higher, be prepared to put your socks back on.)

While juicy, buttery beef that’s been humanely raised is all well and good, what about health? We already know why saturated fats are bad for us. But as we’ve seen in recent years, with the consumption of “healthy fats” rapidly on the rise (like avocados and coconut oil), not all fats are created equal. And First Light’s



Sign up to be on the waiting list for the First Light Steak Club, where the \$150 monthly fee will get you the freshest chops from New Zealand, along with exclusive, goof-proof recipes.

products are no exception. In contrast to conventional beef, the brand's New York strip boasts an impressive 1:1.3 ratio of Omega 3 and Omega 6. (A standard grain-fed New York strip's ratio is 1:9.3, a grain-fed ribeye is 1:24.)

Why is this important? Omega 3 and Omega 6 are the only fatty acids – they're building blocks of our body, aiding everything from cellular development to managing inflammation – our bodies don't produce naturally. Therefore, we need to source both with our diet. The trick, however, is to get them in the right ratio. (Otherwise, too much Omega 6 can trigger heart disease, obesity, and a host of other issues.) But with industrialization and commercial farming overhauling the way we eat, our targeted 1:1 Omega 3 to 6 ratio went way off kilter. (Reportedly, the average American now eats at a ratio ranging from 1:12 to 1:25.)

While it's clear First Light's grass-fed Wagyu beef is nutritionally sound, we have to dig a little deeper and ask – as my professors always did during graduate school – to what extent? A three-year, New Zealand government-backed study being conducted at the Riddet Institute, a leader in food-related scientific research, will uncover the truth. But it's the findings from last summer's clinical trial, in particular, that will prove especially interesting. It involved a control group of men aged 35 to 55 years who regularly eat meat, but also have elevated cholesterol levels. Weekly, for eight weeks, they were given three portions of grass-fed Wagyu, grain-fed beef, or a soy-based substitute, with their health closely monitored before, during, and after the dietary changes. (They were not allowed to pick what they could eat.)

"When you think about fatty meat, you probably think it's dangerous or bad for heart health," says Dr. David Cameron-Smith, the study's lead. "But that's not strictly true. We know different kinds of fats can have different effects. Look at the Mediterranean diet." Regardless of the study's conclusion – results will be released to the public this summer – Smith asserts a valid, overarching point: "We should be eating less, but better meat. The choices we make should ultimately be about quality, not biochemistry."

As for where to get your hands on First Light's products, you're in luck if you're based in California, Oregon, and Washington. (Don't worry: the company is gradually expanding distribution. If you can't tell by now, they're all about doing things the right way, not the fastest.) But if you want to take the situation into your own hands sooner (quite literally), can you put yourself on the waiting list for the exclusive First Light Steak Club, whose \$150 monthly fee will get you an assortment of



pristine chops from New Zealand delivered to your door, along with meticulously tested, goof-proof recipes.

And if you want to try how incredible First Light's beef really is, but don't feel like cooking, and find yourself in Southern California, run (don't walk) to Santa Monica's HiHo Cheeseburger. Co-founded by Jerry Greenberg, the visionary restaurateur behind the wildly popular Sugarfish and Nozawa Bar – he became an owner of First Light after discovering them in his global quest for the best beef – the casual, cheery, and affordable spot recalls all the nostalgia of the classic burgers of your youth, just made with exceptional ingredients.

In short? They're the best burgers out there. But more on that later.

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