

# Haute cuisine licks its lips at cute cuts from Highland coos

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By David Leask

THEY are a Scottish icon, loved here for their shaggy red-haired cuteness that has long beguiled visitors to these shores. But now it is not just their looks that are appealing to foreigners, who have developed a taste for Highland cattle – quite literally.



• **Not just a pretty face: red-haired cattle were originally black until the Victorians cross-bred them with ginger animals for ornamental purposes. Photograph: PA**

Cuts from the beasts are now being served up in fine-dining restaurants from France to Finland. And a campaign is under way to get Scots to eat more of them too.

Several restaurants in Paris – where the breed is known as Les Vaches Highland d'Ecosse – are offering the beef, while restaurants in the country's rural west are serving up renowned Highland

cattle stews.

Diners in Finland are also tucking into Highland cattle in at least four restaurants, and last year an association of breeders was formed in Estonia, the latest of two dozen international Highland cattle societies. One Dutch farmer who breeds the cattle claims the country's Royal Family is among his best customers for premium cuts.

Héléna Ambrosiówicz, French farmer and livestock trader, explained: "There is a growing interest in the Highland (breed) in restaurants.

"More and more French people are interested in the natural qualities of the breed and the way the Highland cattle, which don't need factory-produced feed, can protect the environment."

The red-haired cattle, which were originally black until cross-bred with a ginger breed for ornamental purposes, have long been seen as a symbol of Scotland, playing a decorative role on a number of estates. But while Scots are content to eat other breeds, the delights of eating the Highland variety have remained largely neglected.

Breeders and chefs maintain that Highland cattle provide one of the finest and healthiest red meats available.

Last year, one in three of the breed's bulls and cows sold at marts in Scotland went to breeders on the continent eager to pursue the new restaurant market. Some prized bulls went to breeders in France for more than £3,000.

Hazel Baxter, breed secretary at the Highland Cattle Society, said: "We have seen a big jump in sales to foreign buyers. This is partly because of the exchange rate and partly because of the growing interest in the animals in countries like France."

Baxter believes that the time has now come for Scots to rediscover Highland beef too. "Part of my job is to prove that Highland cows are not just a pretty face," she said last night. "This is some of the best meat you can buy."

TV celebrity chef Nick Nairn, who ran a Michelin-starred restaurant before opening his own cook school, agreed. "I have always been bamboozled by why we don't eat more Highland beef in Scotland.

"A lot of people have seen them as an ornamental breed. But Highland cattle produce fabulous meat. Maybe we haven't wanted to eat them because they are so lovely? But for me there is no better beef than a properly reared, properly cured Highland beef."

Nairn says the secret of the flavour of the Highland beef is the length of time the animal takes to mature, and the fact the hardy beast does all of its growing outdoors, eating natural food, grasses and herbs, rather than the hard pellets consumed by animals wintered in sheds. The result is a rich, dark flesh, marbled with thin layers of fat.

"You can tell Highland beef," Nairn said. "Because, unlike a lot of beef, its flavour stays until the last chew."

Highland beef, in fact, is much leaner than the flesh of cattle grown more quickly for slaughter. Highland cattle have been bred to use their thick hairy coats to stay warm, not layers of fat.

Tom Thomson, who farms hundreds of Highland cattle on his land near Barrhead, East Renfrewshire, doesn't eat any other kind of beef. "There is far less cholesterol in Highland beef," he said. "This is exactly the kind of meat we should all be eating."

Next week he will send another 25 animals across the Channel. "We are getting an awful lot of interest from the Europeans," he said. "I was in Finland last year and was served Highland beef in four restaurants. What is more, they eat the whole animal, nothing is wasted."

In Scotland the meat is sold by a limited number of independent butchers and meat suppliers. Cedar Cottage Country Foods, based near Ayr, said it was spreading the word at farmers' markets. A spokeswoman said: "It really is a beautiful meat and when customers are tempted to buy it they always come back for more. It's a really mature meat and we hang it for four weeks before we sell it."

Highland cattle have barely changed for centuries – although the Victorians did breed the traditionally black beast, the mainstay of clansmen farmers, into today's shaggy-haired ginger beauties.

There are written records of pedigrees going back to the 18th century and a pedigree register, the Highland Cattle Herd Book, has been kept since 1885.

Now computerised, the register means anybody buying Highland beef can be sure of its origins. Thomson believes that traceability could be one of the biggest selling points for his animals. "When people buy our beef they can see where it was reared in the hills," he said.

### **The taste test**

When he was a babe in arms, Glasgow butcher Roddy MacDougall's stockman father moved from the Isle of Bute to tend the herd of Highland cows on the Pollok Estate. A lifetime later, Roddy's self-appointed mission in life is to evangelise on behalf of the beef from Highland cattle, so on Friday he handed over two huge steaks to me, both of them sourced from a farm on his childhood home of Bute.

My mission: to taste-test the two slabs of crimson goodness and report back. There's no better man to help me than my neighbour, Norman Stirrat, an Ayrshire farmer who as well as owning a herd of 110 Limousin and Angus Friesian crosses on to a Charolais bull, also has ten of his own Highland cattle, which were given to him as a wedding present.

The first thing we did was examine the steaks. A deep, dark red, we could tell from the way the layer of fat had yellowed that they had been well hung – somewhere around 28 days was our best guess. The steak itself was beautifully marbled, flecked with the small pieces of fat which give the meat its taste.

Highland cows take longer to mature and are fed almost exclusively on grass as opposed to cereal; its advocates arguing that this gives it a more robust, more faceted flavour. It's a truism that restaurants can't serve a bad steak blue, so to find out I gave each side less than two minutes in the pan, producing a rare steak with a small but beautifully pink outer edge and a nice, deep purple centre.

Running out of provisions, I'd taken some supermarket steaks out of the freezer last week, and the contrast could scarcely have been more marked. Rather than the tough, tasteless pap I'd eaten the previous evening, the Highland steaks were gloriously full of flavour, moist yet firm to the touch and so tender they could be cut with a fork if necessary.

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