

# Pediatrician Finds Success Babying Wagyu Beef

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By Leon Thompson Vermont Correspondent

SPRINGFIELD, Vt. — Connor Killigrew looks at the box of Koffee Kup doughnuts on the long, wooden table at which he sits and raises his eyebrows.

It is May 6, Killigrew's first day at Spring-Rock Farm, a Japanese Wagyu (or, Kobe) beef farm in Springfield, Vt. He is excited to use the bachelor's degree in diversified agriculture he earned last spring from Vermont Technical College.

However, as Killigrew sits between Spring-Rock owner, Dr. Sheila Patinkin, and her only other full-time employee, Phil Ranney, he's also blown away by the agenda at his inaugural Monday meeting.



First: Gramercy Tavern, in New York City, one of Patinkin's four clients, will close for a week in June and has asked to usurp Spring-Rock's kitchen at that time. "They want to cook here," Patinkin says.

Second: At a recent Wagyu auction in California, the average price of a full-blood cow was almost \$9,000; the top cow went for more than \$20,000.

"I need to start charging more for my embryos," Patinkin says. She has been selling them for \$500 and up, to pay for her breeding program at Spring-Rock.

Finally: the American Wagyu Association (AWA) will host its first Vermont conference in Stowe, Aug. 28 and 29, and, because Spring-Rock is a member, it is the conference host farm for about 200 guests. Spring-Rock is donating a steer for the event, which is coupled with a James Beard Celebrity Chef Tour that pairs Wagyu with other foods.

"We have a lot to do," Patinkin says.

"Wow," Killigrew says. "Wow."

Wagyu is richly marbled, highly succulent, high-end meat that is treasured in gourmet circles. Full-blooded Wagyu, the kind bred and sold at Spring-Rock, are documented descendants of Japanese work cattle that are genetically predisposed to intense marbling and a high content of healthy fats.

American beef has six grades; prime is the top cut. An American prime scores a 4 on the 12-grade Wagyu scale. Given that, Wagyu is pricy. It can fetch upwards of \$153 for 6 pounds of tenderloin, or \$10 for two frozen hamburger patties. A carcass in Japan can be worth as much as \$240,000.

Furthermore, because purebred meat is more valuable there are only 5,000 to 10,000 Wagyu in the U.S. that are direct descendants of Japan raising USDA-certified, full-blooded Wagyu requires intense breeding. Fortunately, Patinkin's research background is in genetics. She was a pediatrician.

"It would be so much easier to just put a bull out there and let him do all the work for you," she said. "But I love my cows. I love my cows."

Traditionally, Wagyu in Japan received regular massages and beer or sake in their food, and while Spring-Rock doesn't deploy those practices - first popularized in western culture in a 1960s James Bond novel - the cows at Patinkin's farm are likely on a different regimen than their colleagues called "Angus" found in barns around the rest of Vermont.

The calves are tended to carefully, they are fed only round bales of hay, their health is key, they undergo regular deworming and vaccinations, and they must interact with humans.

"You do have to pamper these cows. There's always an eye and an ear on every group, every day," Ranney said. "They're more sensitive, because of their limited genetic make-up, but that also makes them more friendly and docile. They act like regular dairy cows, not beef cows."

Ranney grew up on a seventh-generation dairy farm in nearby Putney and had minimal experience with beef before he started working with Patinkin about 18 months ago.

Spring-Rock has operated as a farm for five years and started marketing meat in 2012.

"Phil and I learned together," Patinkin said.

Patinkin grew up on a farm in Springfield. She graduated from high school in 1970 and spent a "gap year" in Sweden through the AFS student exchange program. She lived with a veterinarian and his family, which sparked her interest in medicine.

While raising four children, Patinkin earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago and a medical degree from Northwestern University.

She was a practicing pediatrician in Chicago when her husband died suddenly, in March 2005. A year later, and longing to be closer to her family, she found a sprawling, 150-acre spread on Lower Parker Hill Road, in Springfield. The farm dates back to the 1790s and, along with other properties on the dirt road, is on the National Register of Historic Sites.

"Mom, I think our family could gather here," Patinkin's daughter said, when they first walked along Spring-Rock together.

Patinkin cleared the property covered with so much weeds, buckthorn and goldenrod, that they never noticed the brook underneath it all and wondered: “Now what?”

Springfield is hilly, and Wagyu are hillside grazers. With the help of a certified bovine embryologist that lives in nearby Chester, Patinkin bought 20 Wagyu embryos from farms in Washington and Wisconsin and, by utilizing Angus surrogates, yielded 10 calves.

She now has a herd of 65 full-blooded Wagyu cows and is pushing for 100 by year’s end. Large Wagyu farms in the U.S. have 300 to 500 head.

“I had to make a big decision when I left medicine for Wagyu full-time,” Patinkin said.

Spring-Rock currently has four clients: Gramercy Tavern, another restaurant in Boston, and the Weathersfield Inn and Sansei Japanese Restaurant, both in Vermont. Patinkin, Ranney, and, now, Killigrew, bring carcasses to Massachusetts for processing before delivering their product personally.

As Spring-Rock grows purposefully slow, so as not to overextend itself it could become a key player as more Vermont dairy farmers switch to raising beef, and Wagyu makes larger marks on the national beef scene, because of its health benefits.

“Wagyu has the potential to improve beef nationally, across all breeds,” Patinkin said.

