



Grim's fairy tale

The fortunes of this remote corner of Tasmania are being transformed by top restaurants' demands for premium beef, writes *Matthew Denholm*

AS A CATTLE FARMER ON ONE OF THE world's wildest stretches of coastline, Jamie Oliver (no, not that Jamie Oliver) is part of a resilient breed, but he admits to a weakness. It's the jet-black Angus beasts that graze on the lush pastures at this extremity of Tasmania's northwest coast. "They become your mates: that's why I hate to see them slaughtered," he confides quietly, as if worried they might overhear.

Fortunately for premium beef producer Greenham Tasmania, Oliver and 250 farmers like him conquer such attachment to supply its Cape Grim beef brand. In just two years this meat has become coveted by top-flight restaurants such as Rockpool Bar & Grill in Sydney and Melbourne, and Brisbane's Restaurant Two, as well as export markets in Asia.

For beef cattle, Cape Grim and the wider Circular Head region is as good as it gets. Its pastures are among the greenest in the world, fed by the kind of rainfall most Australian farmers can only dream of – an average of 187 days' rain a year. And the air that rolls in off the Southern Ocean is the world's cleanest, with fewer

pollution particles than anywhere else, according to a CSIRO/Bureau of Meteorology air-quality monitoring station – one of 25 around the globe. On our visit to the Cape Grim Baseline Air Pollution Station, perched on a blustery headland, it certainly feels fresh. Our ability to assess the air purity, however, is compromised by a desire to dive straight back into the car. There is a reason for this being the location of the biggest wind farm in the southern hemisphere, and it is gusting into my asthmatic lungs at gale force.

Perfect conditions, then, for breeding healthy and content cattle. The British breeds used for Cape Grim beef – Angus and Hereford – fatten well and produce the marbling that gives the meat both tenderness and taste.

In 2007, local meat producer Greenham – run by Peter Greenham and his son, also Peter – realised the marketing potential on their doorstep and decided to harness it for a premium product. The catalyst was their adoption of the Meat Standards Australia rating system, designed to separate the ordinary from the good, and the good from the excellent.

Until then, the company, based in nearby Smithton, had been just another beef producer, struggling to compete with the multinationals. "We thought if we had a brand backed by high-grade MSA, instead of people saying, 'It's great, it's MSA', they would recognise it – Cape Grim – as our highest brand," says Greenham Jnr.

"The other reason was to draw on all the fantastic attributes of Tasmania – hormone-free cattle, antibiotic-free feedlots and no GM.

"Using the name Cape Grim, with the cleanest air in the world, sort of brings it all together and it works quite well."

So well that it has added about 15pc to the value of the carcasses processed through Greenham's abattoir in Smithton over the past two years.

To maintain the consistency of the brand, each carcass is individually graded and tagged as it hangs in the slaughterhouse. Only cuts with the characteristics of the highest four of the 18 MSA grades – judged by qualities such as colour, marbling, pH, maturity and fat distribution – are used for the Cape Grim brand. The grading

process takes about a minute per carcass, with lesser grades diverted to non-premium brands.

One of the first to appreciate the difference of Cape Grim was chef Neil Perry, of Rockpool Bar & Grill. For him, it was the combination of the greater-than-average age of the Cape Grim cattle – 18 to 36 months – and the good pasture they'd been raised on.

"I'd just come back from Europe, where I had eaten some really good beef and noticed that the taste and the flavour of the meat really benefits from the older age of the cow," Perry says.

"Unfortunately in Australia we eat a lot of yearling, which can be very soft and tender but doesn't actually taste like anything. So we tracked down and put on the menu '36-month Greenham', but Peter recognised we were going through heaps and could really showcase it in Melbourne, so that's when he decided to re-brand it as Cape Grim."

Perry believes grass-fed beef is closer to the way nature intended and produces meat that tastes as beef should.

"Cows were meant to eat grass, so you get a much more pronounced beef flavour which is not interfered with by anything, such as grain-feeding," he says. "You get this wonderful long, clean, natural beef taste."

There are now dozens of restaurants across four states – New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania – selling Cape Grim beef. The domestic restaurant trade is the focus of the business, though about 35pc of the brand is exported to Japan, Korea, Thailand and China. An emerging market is the United States, where grass-fed beef is regarded as a healthy alternative to industrial-scale grain-fed beef.

Australian diners can expect to pay \$30 to \$50 for a Cape Grim cut in a restaurant, ranging from "D Rump aged 35 days, dry-hung four days" (\$29.50) at Launceston's Black Cow Bistro, to "Beef tenderloin on Paris mash with braised shallots and merlot sauce" (\$50) at Bistro Guillaume in Melbourne. In Korea, customers at Lotte Mart supermarkets pay \$15 to \$25 per kilo for Cape Grim steaks, depending on the cut.

The demand is such that Greenham's abattoir processes about 320 beasts a day, providing a steady return for local beef farmers who only two years ago had been facing an uncertain future.

"The premium brand is helping us to survive," says Oliver, who, in partnership with stepfather Guy Wigg, has been supplying the Cape Grim brand for almost 18 months. "If

we can't produce premium cattle, we are finished. If Greenham hadn't come along, the beef industry would have died out."

The Cape Grim experience is a salient lesson for a state where traditional industries such as manufacturing and forestry are in decline, and primary producers supplying multinationals often struggle to survive.

"People have realised that Tasmania can't compete on the world stage with commodity items; they've got to promote their products into niche areas," Greenham Jnr says.

Adding more value to the Cape Grim niche is Greenham's "traceability" program. A code on each carton of the meat traces it to a farmer or group of farmers, their location and farming practices. So people buying Cape Grim beef in one of 60 Lotte Mart supermarkets in Korea can punch the code number on the packet into a web page and discover exactly where their dinner came from, and how it lived its life.

Restaurateurs can do the same. "If they use one carton a night they can tell the wait staff to inform diners, 'Your beef tonight is



Only the best: grading beef for Greenham; opposite, black Angus grazing at Cape Grim

from farmer A, B or C," says Greenham Jnr.

He concedes there is a danger that, having tied the Cape Grim brand to the state's clean, green image, and the northwest coast's natural attributes, it will suffer the consequences of any environmental mismanagement or inappropriate development.

This is why last year Greenham was among the primary producers who successfully fought for Tasmania to retain its GM moratorium for another five years.

"Once it becomes harder and harder to source GM-free beef, it will place Tasmania in a great spot," Greenham Jnr says. "We can then go out and say, 'Yeah, we've got it – and if you want it, you've got to pay for it'."

For many of the state's struggling farmers, that sounds like a breath of fresh air. 🌿