

Obanazawa Beef

Cattle farmers have been raising and conducting research on Japanese Black beef cattle in Obanazawa for more than a century to create one of Yamagata Prefecture's premium brands of wagyu beef. In recent years, some 20 farmers raise more than 8,000 head of cattle under the Obanazawa Beef brand, providing high-quality meat to shops and restaurants across the country.

Obanazawa is in a basin surrounded by the Ou Mountains, a source of abundant fresh water. As one of the snowiest regions in Japan, its winters are long and harsh. Summers are relatively short, hot, and sunny, with a significant temperature difference between day and night. These conditions are ideal for raising healthy cattle with a naturally high fat content.

The Japanese Meat Grading Association evaluates beef on two metrics: yield grade, which measures the proportion of beef obtained from cattle, and meat quality, which is determined by the color, texture, and marbling (the intramuscular fat) of the beef, as well as other factors. The yield grade is ranked ascending from C to A, and meat quality is ranked ascending from 1 to 5. To be sold as Obanazawa Beef, cattle must not only be raised within the city limits but also achieve a rank of 3 or higher. Among Obanazawa Beef brands, *yukifuri* wagyu is the premium product.

Yukifuri (literally "snowfall") wagyu is named for its melt-in-the-mouth quality, likened to Obanazawa's soft powder snow. *Yukifuri* wagyu has three key characteristics:

- High fat content, essential for well-marbled beef;
- Only young heifers that have not birthed calves are used, to preserve the tenderness of the meat; and
- Cattle are raised for 32 months to develop a suitable amount of oleic acid, a naturally occurring fatty acid that makes meat juicier and richer in flavor.