

Omi Beef

Omi beef is a brand of wagyu from Shiga Prefecture noted for its fine marbling, tenderness, mellow aroma, and sweet, rich taste. It is counted as one of the top three Japanese wagyu brands alongside Kobe and Matsusaka beef, and its 400-year history makes it the oldest brand in the country.

Eating meat was largely forbidden or severely restricted prior to the late nineteenth century because of the Buddhist taboo against consuming animal flesh. During the Edo period (1603–1867), raising cattle for slaughter was permitted only in the province of Omi (now Shiga Prefecture), which provided the shogunate with cowhides for drums and beef marinated in miso paste. (The meat was said to have medicinal qualities.) The ban on meat was lifted in 1872, when the government decided to embrace Western dietary habits in the hope that consuming more animal products would make the population healthier and stronger. The reputation of Omi beef spread across the country after 1890, when a rail link to Omihachiman was opened.

The quality of Omi beef is in large part due to the environment in which the cattle are raised. Shiga has spacious pastures, plenty of fresh water, and a temperate climate considered ideal for livestock farming. The number of Omi beef cattle is also kept limited so that sufficient care can be given to maximize the animals' health and maintain a hygienic environment. The animals are fed local rice straw and slaughtered only when they are 3 or 4 years old, as opposed to the beef cattle average of 2 years.

Omi beef can be enjoyed in dishes such as sukiyaki, shabu-shabu, steak, and *yakiniku* barbecue, and Omi beef sushi is also available in some places. There are several restaurants serving Omi beef near Omihachiman Station and in the old town south of the Hachimanbori Moat. Visitors seeking to buy beef to take home may want to stop by the Sennaritei Hachimanbori Store, which sells a variety of steaks and other cuts as well as products such as burger patties, sausages, croquettes, and ground beef. The shop has a restaurant on the second floor.