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## Herd instinct

**A bullish Rich Reeves goes in search of the World's best beef**

In their quest for the best beef on Earth, Japanese hill farmers feed their cattle Asahi beer and massage their coats with sake! This month I took a trip to Lydling Farm in the Surrey Hills, home of one of the UK's largest prize-winning Aberdeen Angus herds, the Rosemead, to discover what tricks British farmers have up their sleeve.

The rise of the Aberdeen Angus has no parallel in the annals of cattle breeding. Progressive Aberdeenshire lairds established the earliest lines in the mid-18th Century. Spreading first throughout the UK, and then the world, the breed saw off continental competition to become accepted as the best beef of all.

It is an established fact that happy cattle make better meat. Invariably, the final product is softer and more flavoursome if the creature has led a relaxed life. At Lydling, farmer Angus Stovold has very happy cattle indeed. Like his father and grandfather before him, he tends to his animals as if they were part of an extended family.

"I've got the best cattle in the world," he says proudly. "If I look after them, they will look after me."

This simple logic was brought home to me with a bump when I met a couple of the gargantuan breeding bulls. Rosemead Billy Must - or 'Billy' - was a docile creature, born and bred on the farm. By contrast, Lockerley Mere Boy - 'Locky' to

his friends - was an 'outsider', an impressive but feisty beast. Selecting a bull to join the herd is by no means an exact science. Angus looks for a silkiness, a softness and healthy 'give' in the flesh, by pushing gently with his fist in the rib area. And it was while demonstrating this technique that he explained, incidentally, about the copper ring through the nose.

"Grab that and you can lead them anywhere," he asserted confidently, as I retreated from the tonne plus Locky with conspicuous lack of grace.

A characteristic bred into Aberdeen Angus for generations is 'marbling' - threads of fat woven through the meat. This is essential to good beef, developing as the animal matures, along with richness of texture and that distinctive deep colour. At Lydling the animals are finished slowly to ensure this, and the meat is hung for three or four weeks, softening it, enabling the flavour to develop even more.



Aberdeen Bull

But getting the best from your herd calls for more than just traditional technique. It's about knowing each animal individually. Angus's best mother cow, Rosemead Bell Maid, actually looks a bit scrawny, but she puts everything into her children and produces fantastic calves. She is the one that Angus would take if he ever left Lydling. The calves are born outside and grazed throughout the year on traditional, unsprayed water meadows. Not a trace of hormones, GM foods, growth promoters or antibiotics finds its way into their feed of home grown maize, wheat and silage. It's about as natural as it gets.

Slowly, we humans are coming to realise what Angus has always understood: that it is the ecosystem as a whole that enables one to farm the land with success. He has an enlightened environmental policy and manages 40 of his 700 acres as a haven for wildlife. His beef travels no more than 17 miles to the butcher.

Finally, how about this. In accordance with the Aberdeen Angus Cattle Society, each animal has its very own passport.

■ Angus Stovold's Aberdeen Angus is available via [www.aberdeenangus.co.uk](http://www.aberdeenangus.co.uk) and from Surrey farmers markets. Lydling has open days throughout the year. Rich Reeves can be contacted on 07711 083308 or via [www.deepdish.net](http://www.deepdish.net)