



A fresh take on Wagyu

By MATTHEW CAWOOD

ON THE north-west tip of Tasmania, the Hammond family is working with two of the most powerful themes current in beef marketing: “Wagyu” and “grass-fed”.

The Wagyu part of the equation is nothing new for the Hammonds – they were among the first to import Wagyu genetics into Australia in the early 1990s.

Turning them off grass with high marble scores is fresh, though.

They are tapping into two strong currents washing through global perceptions about beef – Wagyu is a desirable luxury product and grass feeding delivers a healthy, tasty meat from an environmentally sound production system.

If the possibility of getting “green, healthy, tasty luxury” into one message is a marketer’s dream, so is the Robbins Island environment.

It all adds up to a potent package that has helped place Robbins Island in several high-end Australian restaurants, and in Asian restaurants like the Shangri-La in Shanghai and Prime Society in Singapore.

But marketing is only the glitzy end



of two decades of hard work and risk-taking.

In the early 1990s when the Hammonds decided to be part of the early wave of Wagyu embryo imports out of the US, the family had been struggling as a price-taking producer of conventional beef.

Their knowledge of Wagyu at the time was only that it was the most expensive beef in the world.

That fact was enough to take them to David Blackmore, the pioneer Australian Wagyu breeder.

Their first shipment of \$2000 embryos arrived in 1994.

“We started artificially inseminating our Angus cows,” Mr Hammond said.

“And for the next 15 years everything we bred was by AI or embryo transfer.”

By the late 1990s the Hammonds had built a 500-head first-cross cow herd (steers were sold to the first-cross live trade).

The first-cross cow herd was sold to the Mormon-owned Ag Reserves in 2001, and the Hammonds have since

concentrated on building a purebred herd.

Today, all the Hammonds’ steers go to the Australian Agricultural Company and their heifers supply the Robbins Island grassfed beef brand, finished at a 300 kilogram carcass weight.

The heifers are grown out on cocksfoot, fescue and clover pastures for about three years and at slaughter are ranked into two marble score ranges, 4-6, and 7-9.

The family is still working on refining the economics of grass versus grain.

To assess the bottom line of each production system, they currently have 400 heifers on feed at Killara feedlot, and 600 on grass at Robbins Island.

The brand’s beef is processed by Greenhams – another north-west Tasmanian family-owned, grassfed specialist operation.

The Hammonds are enthusiastic about the potential of the “grass-fed Wagyu” concept, Mr Hammond said, partly because it’s not something that can be easily replicated elsewhere.