

# This exec loves nothing more than to get his hands dirty on weekends

*Jameson Capital director Jonathan Webster has a full-on side hustle: he's also a Wagyu beef farmer. He answers our Time Out Q&A.*

## Life & Leisure

Dec 13, 2021 - 10.02am



**J**onathan Webster is co-founder and director of Jameson Capital, a Melbourne-based alternative investment management firm.

### How did you get into raising Wagyu cattle and how long have you been doing it?

My family has a background in dairy and beef cattle production, and in 2016 I was introduced to a very clever doctor turned farmer who had been breeding full-blood Wagyu cattle for many years. We bought embryos to implant in our Angus cattle, then we bought 10 outstanding young full-blood Wagyu heifers that were in calf. After they calved, we sent them away to be flushed to create a few hundred more embryos that we then implanted in our cows. Our numbers have grown, and we now use artificial insemination as well as embryos and back-up bulls to complete the breeding process.



Jonathan Webster wearing his second hat. "I get to do things like feeding, weighing, calving."

**Where is your Wagyu farm and how big is it?**

It is at Yea in the Murrindindi shire, about 90 minutes north-east of Melbourne. Most people know the area for the Yarra Valley vineyards, but the Great Dividing Range is also perfect for breeding and fattening cattle. The property is around 320 hectares, with great rainfall, excellent pastures and fencing, and a good balance of hills and river flats.

**What's so special about Wagyu beef?**

Wagyu is a breed with genetic origins in Japan. It is one of the most sought-after meats in the world because of its marbling, which makes for a buttery, unique flavour. It takes 28 to 36 months for Wagyu cattle to develop the intense marbling in their muscles – longer than most other breeds. It's important they are reared in a low-stress environment, which helps make for tender meat.



"Farming forces you to be practical and innovative," Webster says.

**How many hours a month do you spend on your Wagyu?**

About 10 hours a week – mostly on weekends. Midweek, I tend to think about factors outside my control such as weather, disease and markets. But part of the thrill is preparing contingencies for these scenarios. On weekends, I get to do things like feeding, weighing, tagging, drenching, vaccinating, pregnancy testing and calving.

**Does your Wagyu hobby make a profit?**

It does. The profit on cost is reasonable. Although the cattle are expensive to breed and then feed through to an average 850 to 1000 kilograms on the hoof, there is a good margin if you get the formula correct.

**Does it help to come from a farming family?**

My father grew up on a farm in East Gippsland in Victoria but moved to the city before I was born. My family got back into farming when I was in my 20s, and I was only really introduced to it then. In the early days, we bred Angus and Charolais commercially, but over the past five years, we have slowly been converting the herd to full-blood Wagyu.

**Do you raise red or black Wagyu or both? Purebred or crossbred? Black full-blood Wagyu with some F1s (first cross). Full bloods can be traced back to their Japanese heritage.**

**How many head do you have?**

We're breeding towards a herd of about 300 full-blood breeders, plus 200 F1s on another property we have on the Goulburn River.

**Who will buy your cattle and where will they go?**

We sold our first crop of steers to a dynamic redistribution/marketing group in Melbourne, which is selling the meat locally and plans to export as soon as we can increase our production. We have another 24 ready to go. Next year, our numbers will double. Breeding, then growing and feeding takes time.



Webster with his younger daughter, Scarlett. "They love the lifestyle, too."

**Do you slaughter any cattle for your own use?**

Each year, a great mobile butcher visits the farm, and we take one for our own consumption. We set up a family production line, packing steaks, mince, casserole cuts and roasts, plus making burgers and sausages. The whole animal is used, and I've even rendered the fat for cooking.

**How marbled is the meat?**

We recently sold our first group of full-blood 38-month-old Wagyu steers with marble scores of 9/9+, which is the highest grade achievable in Australia.

**Any Wagyu grilling tips?**

We like to take 10- to 12-millimetre-thick steaks, salt them, sear them on each side in beef fat or butter on the hot plate, then place them on the open grill. This method is not an old family secret: I believe it is how the late Vlado Gregurek liked his chefs to cook at his famous Melbourne restaurant, Vlado's.

**Anything you don't like about breeding Wagyu?**

They are different to British and European breeds when it comes to handling. They are smart, shy, perhaps a little easily frightened and keen to go in another direction when you are trying to muster them into the yards. As they get older, they are more settled and easier to handle.

**Love about breeding Wagyu?**

I have always found manual labour satisfying – there is a sense of accomplishment that comes with getting a job done. Our kids, Lucinda, 5, and Scarlett, 3, love the lifestyle, too. Small jobs can feel like big achievements when you're young, and it makes them happy. Plus we get to do it together. Learning to work is great fun on a farm. Don't get me wrong – there's much harder work, too, and farming forces you to be practical and innovative. There are long lead times and some problem-solving that goes on before animals exit through the farm gate.