THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



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Like Your Steak Aged 36 Months? Try 17 Years

Restaurateur lets his steers wander mountain meadows for years, reaching vast size, figuring it's the way to produce the tastiest steaks. It's a bovine paradise of herbal treatments and pedicures, ruled by the 3700-pound Divino



José Gordon brushes an ox on his ranch in Jiménez de Jamuz. Spain. PHOTO: OLIVER GRIFFIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Por Oliver Griffin

July 10, 2018 10:59 a.m. ET

JIMÉNEZ DE JAMUZ, Spain—There are cows that eat only grass and roam free. There are Kobe cattle, whose muscles are massaged for months to tenderize the meat they eventually produce.

And then there are José Gordon's oxen.



Wait for me

An animal lucky enough to be part of the restaurateur/rancher's herd in northwestern Spain gets to laze about in mountain pastures redolent of thyme and other fragrant herbs. It is stroked with metal brushes. It might even get a pedicure.

Above all, unlike normal steers that spend a few months in a feedlot and then go to market, the cattle in Mr. Gordon's herd are allowed to live for years, sometimes close to their life spans of nearly two decades. before being turned into steaks for his restaurant.

The slow-food movement was never quite like this. Mr. Gordon's methods, he admits, are "a type of madness."

Mr. Gordon, proprietor of Bodega El Capricho in Spain's Castille-Leon region, believes he knows when an animal in his herd has finally reached its peak condition and is ready for the abattoir. He decides this by the look and feel of the animal. It's a matter of instinct, Mr. Gordon says. A few weeks too long or too short can mean less-than-perfect meat.

His oxen, a few of which actually pulled wagons before he acquired them, meander in a pasture well above sea level, at an altitude of 800 meters, where Mr. Gordon says the grass is a little drier and cleaner.

He keeps them far from busy roads, immersing them in natural beauty to prevent stress. "They have eyes too," he says.



José Gordon poses with cuts of beef at his Bodega El Capricho. PHOTO: SERGIO ENRIQUEZ-NISTAL/BODEGA EL CAPRICHO

Every day, a veterinarian visits the herd, currently 155 head strong and ranging in age from two to 21 years. The vet isn't there to administer drugs, though. Mr. Gordon says chemicals in druss can damage meat.

That means any pain or injury is treated with herbal remedies. On a recent day, one huge steer languished in the ranch's infirmary with an herb pack applied to an aching knee.

Besides fresh grass most of the year, the *bueyes*, as they're called in Spain, get to nibble the leaves of oak trees, the same that produce the acorns fed to Spain's prized libericopies.

The current king of Mr. Gordon's herd is 16-year-old Divino, a majestic animal of 3,700 pounds, nearly triple the weight at which most beef cattle go to market. Mr. Gordon has nicknamed him El gran lefe—the big boss—for his haughty manner.

The enormous beasts hail from ancient bovine breeds originating in the Iberian peninsula, such as the Barrosā of Portugal and the Rubia Gallega from northern Spain. Some have horns stretching to great spans, while others' horns curl close to their heads.

The girth they reach as they age means many stagger as they get to their feet. Specialists administer bovine pedicures to some—at a cost of \$150 a hoof—to make sure their great weight doesn't damage their feet or cause arthritis. Sometimes they are shoed, like horses.



Divino, center, who weighs in at 3,700 pounds, is nicknamed 'El gran jefe'—the big boss. PHOTO: OLIVER GRIFFIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Gordon is quick to say he doesn't treat his giant animals like pets. Yet on a recent day, as he walked among the herd with a metal brush, they came up to him, demanding attention.

A couple bumped him with their noses like a cat rubbing against its owner's hand. He gently admonished a few that he couldn't spend the day brushing them: "No hay mas," he said.—"There's no more."

Mr. Gordon admits to a pang of grief when he sends animals he has raised for so long to slaughter.

Even after they are butchered, he takes his sweet time. Steaks are aged about 180 days. The legs get up to four years of curing as he turns them into a type of dried meat called *cecina*.

"It takes 20 years to be able to enjoy this product," Mr. Gordon says, referring to the *cecina* he plans to produce from Divino. "It is something that is very exclusive in the world hecause it's crazu."

Such care doesn't come cheap. Mr. Gordon estimates each animal costs nearly \$3,000 a year, in a combination of its feed, hoof care and vet bills, which is at least twice the cost of traditional ranching.

A steer like Divino, who will probably go to slaughter this year, will have cost more than \$30,000 to raise. Mr. Gordon says he breaks even on most animals, charging 6120 a kilo (about \$63,50 a pound) for a premium chuleta steak that he says is more delicate than regular beef.

Luis Lanzant, a 43-year-old diner from Madrid, has no complaints. The meat was "nothing like I've ever tasted before," he says. It was "impeccable."

A slower, longer approach to raising cattle and then aging their carcasses is popular with some diners in other parts of Europe, too, who appreciate the mature flavor that comes with older meat. "You can really taste the grass and the maturity of the animal. It's really quite different to a lot of the beef that people will be eating." says Pash Peters, head chef at Pellita restaurant in Bristod, U.K., which serves steaks from eight-year-old cattle.

The practicalities are another matter. David Alvis, managing director of a U.K. cattleraising group called Stabiliser Cattle Co., likens Mr. Gordon's operation to producing Ferraris.

"Maintaining an animal for many, many years purely to enhance the eating quality of the meat has a massive cost associated with it," Mr. Aivis says. "Although he is taking these animals to very high weights, the time span means the daily gain is very low. It's a highly inefficient process of producing meat."

Mr. Gordon admits he loses money with some of the animals he keeps longest. "Those that are 15 or 16, for example, it's impossible to make a profit," he says. "There have been some that have lost 66,000 to 67,000."

"It's better not to think about it," Mr. Gordon says. "I believe that what I do is mystical, magical. It goes beyond profitability. This is my work and my world. I would never change it."

Corrections & Amplifications

Spanish restaurateur José Gordon's ranch is in Jiménez de Jamuz, Spain. An earlier version of this article misspelled the city's name in a photo caption. (July 10, 2018)