

Cattle farmer tells **Richard McComb** why only the finest well-bred Scottish beef is fit for the table

Ritch meat is a rare treat

We are eating Maud's granddaughter.

A classic starter of steak tartare is followed by a brilliantly roasted fillet, served with chantenay carrots, purple sprouting broccoli and aligote potato (that's cheesy mash). On a separate plate, there are slices of the luscious chateaubriand. All offspring of Maud, all scrummy.

I'm not usually a fan of fillet. I don't see the pay-back from the huge inflation in price and tend to go for a ribeye or a sirloin.

But this fillet is something else. It is so clean to eat, slightly creamy in texture, and tremendously well-flavoured. I am in awe of this fillet. It is fillet finesse, the Ferrari of fillet.

The people to thank for the divine cooking are to be found in the kitchen of Opus in Birmingham, marshalled and spiritually guided by chef director David Colcombe, also known as University College Birmingham's newly-appointed Visiting Professor of Culinary Arts. I've long considered Colcombe a Dumbledore-type character to would-be kitchen wizards. Now it's official, and well deserved, too.

However, the man to laud for the production of this grand beast is Willie Ritch, who should be appointed Scotland's patron saint of beef. Willie has travelled from Fingask Farm in Aberdeenshire to spread the gospel of beef rearing, drawing on the experience of his family who have worked the land in this part of east Scotland since the 1940s. The beef here has a statesman-like pedigree.

Willie says: "When the tenants of Smithfield market in London wanted to present a baron of beef to the Prime Minister Winston Churchill for the celebration of his 80th birthday, my grandfather's reputation was such that they came to his farm to choose the animal."

Willie's wife's great, great-grandfather was the uncle of William McCombie, who made great improvements to the Aberdeen Angus breed in the 19th century. McCombie's most famous steer, Black Prince, won top gong at the Birmingham and Smithfield shows in 1867 and was later served to Queen Victoria at Christmas.

Despite this heritage, it wasn't until fairly recently that Willie, and his father George, started breeding their own cattle. Until the mid-90s, they were beef finishers, buying in cattle from the hills and fattening them up on the lower lying ground's sweet grasses. Willie gradually became disenchanted with the standard of the beef and the uninspiring uniformity.

"By 1996, you could not buy anything other than Charolais and Limousin. I said to my dad, 'We are not doing this job any better than the English or the French'. We couldn't get the sort of cattle we used to get. I decided we would start breeding our own," says Willie, adding: "When I was a boy, all the cattle were black cattle. In 1996, you would hardly see a black beast to buy."

It took him two years to find a good Aberdeen



Beef slaughtered at Willie Ritch's farm is known for its fine texture and intense flavour

WILLIE RITCH STEAK DINNER AT OPUS

Aperitif: Bonny Doon Vin Gris de Cigare 2005

Fingask Farm traditional steak tartare, quail's egg

Wine: Camin Larredya, Jurancon Sec 2005

Fillet of John Dory, slow-braised oxtail and cockles
Fingask Farm beef

Domaine Luche de la Cessane (grenache, merlot)
2007

Conference pear and almond martini, ginger crème
fraîche sorbet

Muscat de Rivesaltes, Languedoc Rousillon 2007

Angus bull to kickstart the Ritch's breeding programme. Willie, who is 53, recalls: "The bulls were mostly big but not fleshy, or fleshy but not very big. The best were available to the best breeders who were buying them for £30,000. But as a fresh breeder, I was looking to buy one for £3,000."

After scouring Scotland for his pure Aberdeen Angus, the farmer eventually got his bull at a sale down the road. Willie paid 3,000 guineas for three-

year-old Ettrich of Inchmarnock, or Eric for short. He also bought 20 heifers, a cross of Aberdeen Angus and Limousin. Willie is convinced the addition of the Limousin gives the meat a special texture and grain and having tasted the meat I am in unequivocal agreement.

He says: "The pure breed Aberdeen Angus were badly conformed and didn't look like they would supply the size of meat that would be profitable. The

Limousin is highly regarded in France for beef. It has a very fine grain. Aberdeen Angus is very tender and juicy and that combined with the fine grain of the Limousin gives that extra special something."

Willie says the cattle's diet is also vital. His herd is fed mainly on grass and grass silage in the winter – and a small amount of barley – as opposed to the majority of commercially-reared cattle whose diets are heavy in barley. He believes the grass gives his cattle a superior "beefy flavour".

He sells his steers (castrated males) to top catering butcher Aubrey Allen, based in Coventry. From here, the beef is distributed to some of the country's leading restaurant, including The Fat Duck in Bray. The heifers though, which tend to be smaller, go to a local butchers near Fingask. Willie could probably sell his entire herd to Peter Allen, the boss of Aubrey Allen, such is the demand for his quality beef, but the Scotsman likes to maintain his local ties.

He says: "It is great to walk down to the local market and have someone say, 'I had one of your steaks last night and it was fantastic.'"

Fingask Farm now has 120 cattle on its 700 acres with 55 to 60 animals being slaughtered a year, from September through to November, the meat thereby retaining the sweetness of the summer grass. The slaughter house is just a few miles down the road, minimising the stress to the animals.

Willie says there has been a sea-change in consumer interest in what might be called "real" beef.

"Once people have tasted good beef, everything else is a disappointment. They want to know more about it. The trouble with the supermarket is that people buy what they think looks good. It's probably pink and it doesn't have a lot of fat on it.

"You want the meat to be dark in colour. You want it with marbling through it. Then you know it is going to be juicy," says Willie over a pre-dinner drink in the bar at Opus.

He always eats his beef rare, never with mustard ("Auck! Why have it? You don't need mustard polluting it") but he hardly ever eats it in a restaurant. "It is always a disappointment. I'll eat it tonight though. I know where it has come from."

Traceability comes as standard. I decide to put Willie on the spot and ask him the origins of the animal we are eating tonight. Quick as a flash, he pulls a green diary out of his dapper tweed suit and informs me that, unusually, we are eating a heifer (they normally all stay in Scotland, but this one was too big for Scottish tastes). The beast was killed on September 17. He says he could tell me the exact cow – it's one of three – by checking the paperwork, but I explain this isn't necessary.

Needless to say, Willie's diary also informs him that the heifer's grandfather was Tonley Jewel Eric – the most prolific bull the Ritch's have ever owned, fathering 170 calves – and that her granny was Maud.

Maud herself was one of the original heifers bought by the Ritch's in the late 1990s. What a marvellous, tasty legacy she has left.