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PLAYBOY GOURMAND

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BY A.J. BAIME

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE WORLD'S MOST DECADENT MEAL

Unless you're a butcher, chef or cowboy, a lot of what you know about steak is probably wrong. The blood that drips onto your cutting board when you slice a rib eye? That's not blood. Steak comes from cow, right? Well, sort of. Myth and misunderstanding are woven into the fibers of red meat like the marbled fat that makes it sublime. Plus, beef has changed in recent years due to nuances in the meat industry, so the sirloin you ate as a kid is often not the same thing you eat today. In a quest to master man's most decadent meal, we sought answers from some of America's finest meat-loving chefs. Here's all you need to know, just in time for grilling season.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZACHARY JAMES JOHNSTON

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PLAYMALL LEVEL



WHAT IS BEEF?

As with sex, when you indulge in a steak, you ought to know its gender. Technically, cow is female. "What you're eating is steer," says Tom Colicchio, chef-owner of Craft, Craftsteak and Colicchio & Sons, five-time James Beard award winner and head judge on *Top Chef*. "Steers are castrated male cattle." Why do farmers cut their testicles off? "So they sit around and get fat," says Colicchio. "They can't fuck, so they eat and get fat." The more fat marbled into the meat, the richer its flavor.

HOW DO YOU COOK A STEAK? Here's the general process, as told by Michael Symon, the James Beard award-winning chef-owner of Lola and B Spot in Cleveland and Roast in Detroit: "Season it with kosher salt anywhere from six to 12 hours in advance. The salt permeates the protein and starts breaking down the

cell structure, making the muscle more tender. Let the meat get to room temperature. I find that the best way to cook steak is over a charcoal grill, but you can use a cast-iron pan also. Rub a little olive oil on the steak and cook it over medium high. Once you put it down, let it char, about four to six minutes. Then flip it. To me, medium rare is perfect, so cook for another five to six minutes, depending on how thick the cut is. The biggest mistakes people make? They don't let the steak get to room temperature before they cook, and they move it around too much while it's cooking. Just set it down, let it develop a char, then flip it once."

WHAT IS PRIME BEEF, AS OPPOSED TO CHOICE AND SELECT? "A USDA inspector examines the carcass cut at the 13th rib," says Tim Love, chef-owner of the Lonesome Dove Western Bistro and the Love Shack in Fort Worth. "He instantly dictates the value of the meat by grading

it prime—which is the best—choice or select." The key thing the inspector looks for is fat. The more fat marbled into the interior, the better the meat.

WHAT VINO BEST ACCOMPANIES STEAK? Bold reds with structure and tannins—cabernet, Bordeaux, amarone, Barolo—are best. Both Colicchio and David Burke, the man behind meat temples Primehouse in Chicago and David Burke Townhouse in New York, go for French pinot noir. "Give me a grand cru Burgundy and I'm happy," says Colicchio. Adds chef Symon, "I love funky beers; they're great with meat. There's a brewery called Jolly Pumpkin out of Michigan that makes an awesome beer aged in red-wine casks. It cuts through steak incredibly well."

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO LET STEAK SIT ON A CUTTING BOARD FOR 10 MINUTES AFTER YOU COOK IT? "When you cook a steak, the muscle tenses



SOME OF AMERICA'S MOST ACCOMPLISHED CARNIVORES DISH ON THEIR FAVORITE STEAKS



PORTERHOUSE

This expensive cut is a bone-in steak that has the filet on one side and the strip on the other. If the filet is less than roughly 1.25 inches across, it's called a Tbone. What makes the porterhouse so decadent? The filet is lean, great for dipping in, say, a ramekin of bordelaise sauce, while the strip is full of rich fat, so it can go it alone.



FILET

Filet mignon has always enjoyed the spotlight, but most chefs don't go for it. A slice off the tenderloin, it's lean and lacks richness. Says Michael Symon (James Beard award winner, chef-owner of Lola and B Spot in Cleveland and Roast in Detroit): "Wrap it in four pounds of bacon and stick it in the oven. That'll give it some flavor!"



SIRLOIN

From the French *surloigne*, meaning "above the loin" (it's actually part of the hip), the term *sirloin* covers the top sirloin, bottom sirloin and sirloin tip roast. All vary in terms of richness and cost. The top sirloin is the finest, so if you want a sirloin steak, ask for the top. The others are often chopped into stew meat or ground into hamburger.



HANGER

"I love it so!" shouts Symon at the mention of the word *hanger*. "Grill it over charcoal and serve it with a salad with parsley, chilies, anchovies, capers and olive oil." A hanger is cut from the steer's diaphragm. It's sometimes called a butcher's steak because the butcher would take this cut home for himself. Serve it medium rare; it chews like a Bridgestone if overcooked.



SKIRT

Long, flat and full-flavored, this steak is cut from the steer's chest and should be served sliced. Mexicans put it in fajitas. The Chinese use it for stir-fry. David Burke (chef-owner of Primehouse in Chicago and David Burke Townhouse in New York) likes it on a grill—"with *chimichurri* sauce, beer and salad."

**HE
MAKES
"TEXAS
CAVIAR"
OUT OF
BLACK-
EYED
PEAS.**

RARE



NEW YORK STRIP

When we think New York strip, we think of Paul Castellano and his soldiers at Sparks Steak House, with old-school sides like creamed spinach and dry martinis to start—classic Gotham decadence. A strip is cut from the short loin, a muscle in the steer's back that doesn't do much work and so is richly marbled with fat. Thus it requires a full-bodied red—a Barolo or a Toro, perhaps.



TRI-TIP

A triangular muscle, tri-tip is part of the bottom sirloin. It used to be stew meat until a bunch of restaurants in Santa Maria, California made it popular by rubbing it with garlic salt and other seasonings and cooking it over red oak or smoking it in a pit. (Tri-tip is sometimes called Santa Maria steak.) When chef Symon uses tri-tip, he likes it "quick sautéed with wild mushrooms and ramps, deglazing the pan with red wine and finishing it with butter."



RIB EYE

The king of steaks. "The bone-in rib eye is my favorite," says Tom Colicchio (winner of five James Beard medals, chef-owner of Craft, Craftsteak and Colicchio & Sons). "It has the leaner meat in the center and the fattier flap meat on the outside." The steak is cut from the top of the rib, and it's as richly marbled as beef gets. How to serve? David Burke likes his "with soft French bread and butter, shoestring potatoes and a great bottle of wine."



**WHEN WE THINK OF
NEW YORK STRIP,
WE THINK OF PAUL
CASTELLANO AT SPARKS
STEAK HOUSE.**

up," says Love, "just like your finger would if you burned it. When you let it sit, the meat gets more tender." Adds Colicchio, "Cut a steak too soon after cooking and all the juices bleed onto the cutting board. If you let it rest, the juices move to the inside, adding to the flavor."

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CORN-FED AND GRASS-FED BEEF? To echo the old saying, a steer is what it eats. Corn contains far more carbohydrates and calories than grass. "If you're looking for rich flavor and marbling, you have to go with corn fed," says Colicchio. "From a health standpoint, grass fed is better because it's leaner. The problem with corn is you have to give the animal antibiotics because it's not meant to eat corn. If you want antibiotic-free beef, go with grass fed."

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH GROWTH HORMONE? In the 1950s cattle farmers started injecting steers with steroids, and it has become common practice in America (though not in Europe). An animal that grows faster can be slaughtered younger, thus raising savings and profit. That said, younger cows don't marble with fat as fast. That's why, years ago, about 30 percent of beef was graded prime, while two to four percent is today.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN A STEAK IS MEDIUM RARE? Use your finger against your hand to gauge the tenderness of the meat. It should feel like...

RARE:
PRESS WITH INDEX FINGER
ON THE BASE OF THUMB.

MEDIUM:
PRESS CENTER OF THE PALM.

WELL DONE:
PRESS INSIDE EDGE OF
THE HAND AT THE PINKIE
KNUCKLE.

BLADES OF GLORY



Butchering time: The Sugimoto Chinese-style cleaver (\$401) is for slicing meat. A Masamoto Garasuki (\$280) cuts through bone as if it were butter (both carbon steel, korin.com).

WHAT'S KOBE BEEF? In the region of Kobe in Japan, farmers have raised a breed of cattle called Wagyu according to specific traditions that over centuries have produced beef so marbled, it's a delicacy. Most beef cattle in America are either Angus or Hereford. We have Wagyu, but not Wagyu that's been bred as it is in Kobe. "It's like sparkling wine in California," says Love. "It's not champagne unless it's from Champagne."

WHY AGE STEAK? In the dry-aging room at David Burke's Primehouse, steer carcasses mature like wine and cigars. The dry-aging process, explains Burke's executive sous-chef, Pedro Avila, tenderizes beef and removes moisture (which intensifies flavor). The beef crusts over on the outside as it begins to rot. This crust is cut off and discarded. Since so much of the beef is tossed, what remains becomes very expensive. "Thus the price on the menu," smiles Avila. A dry-aged steak spends a minimum of three weeks in the cooler and could spend as much as 50 days.

WHERE'S THE BEST PLACE TO BUY BEEF? Chefs swear by Niman Ranch (nimanranch.com), a consortium of farms where cattle are raised with no hormones or antibiotics and then butchered and even dry-aged. It's expensive, but as chef Colicchio advises, "Eat less and eat better."



ON THE SIDE

FOR OUR SPECIALS

THIS EVENING,

WE HAVE...

TIM LOVE'S GRILLED TOMATO AND SCALLION SALAD

At his Lonesome Dove bistro in Fort Worth, Tim Love douses classic Western cuisine with loads of nuance and garnishes it with a sense of humor. He makes "Texas caviar" out of black-eyed peas and jalapeños, rabbit and rattlesnake sausage and plenty of exotic game (elk, kangaroo). For a steak side or appetizer, he offers up a tangy grilled salad.

(SERVES FOUR)

- 4 VINE-RIPENED TOMATOES, CORED AND CUT INTO WEDGES
- 1 BUNCH SCALLIONS
- CANOLA OIL
- KOSHER SALT
- FRESHLY GROUND BLACK PEPPER
- 2 TBSP. FRESH LIME JUICE
- ½ CUP EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL
- 1 CUP CRUMBLED COTIJA CHEESE

Light a grill. Rub tomatoes and scallions with canola oil and season with salt and pepper. Grill over high heat, turning once, until blistered. Chop scallions and dress veggies with lime, olive oil and cheese, and serve.



THE STRIP HOUSE'S CRISP GOOSE FAT POTATOES

These days you can buy goose fat on Amazon. The Strip House in New York is known for its goose fat potatoes. Here's the recipe, courtesy of owners Peter and Penny Glazier:

(SERVES FOUR)

HERB-INFUSED

GOOSE FAT

- ¾ CUP MELTED GOOSE FAT
- 6 THYME STEMS, LEAVES CHOPPED AND RESERVED
- 2 ROSEMARY STEMS, LEAVES CHOPPED AND RESERVED
- 6 GARLIC CLOVES
- 1¼ TSP. KOSHER SALT
- ¾ TSP. FRESHLY GROUND BLACK PEPPER

POTATOES

- 4 SPRIGS THYME
- 2 SPRIGS ROSEMARY
- 2 BAY LEAVES
- 3 LARGE IDAHO POTATOES, CUT INTO ¾-INCH PIECES
- 1 TBSP. KOSHER SALT
- 8 CUPS WATER

GARNISH

- 5 CLOVES THINLY SLICED GARLIC
- COARSE SEA SALT
- ¼ CUP COARSELY CHOPPED PARSLEY

Goose fat: In a saucepan, combine goose fat, thyme and rosemary stems, garlic, one teaspoon kosher salt and ½ teaspoon ground pepper. Bring to a simmer, stirring occasionally. When garlic browns (about 15 minutes), remove pan from heat and allow to steep for 10 minutes. Strain fat of solids. Reserve warm.

Potatoes: Tie thyme, rosemary and bay leaves with twine. Put potatoes, herbs and salt into a pot with water. Bring to a boil and cook for 10 minutes. Drain, discard herbs and set aside (do not refrigerate). **Assemble:** Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place potatoes in a large bowl and add the reserved chopped herb leaves (rosemary and thyme). Season with ¾ teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon ground pepper. Gently mix potatoes while adding ½ cup of infused goose fat. (Some of the potatoes will break apart.) Tightly pack potatoes into a six-inch-diameter baking dish or skillet. Bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until crust is golden brown. Let cool, about 45 minutes, and refrigerate until ready to use. (Recipe may be prepared to this point one day ahead.) **To serve:** Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Invert potato cake onto a baking sheet, unmold and brush with remaining goose fat. Bake 40 minutes, basting frequently with goose fat. Transfer to a serving platter, and sprinkle with sliced garlic, coarse salt and chopped parsley.