

All Sizzle, Plenty of STEAK

A spate of new steak houses are dotting the horizon, not just in the meat-loving United States, but all around the world. LARRY OLMSTED takes a look at what's driving the trend.

Used to be, great chefs stuck to French food and fancy techniques and unique ingredients that required a food glossary (or perhaps a snooty waiter) to decipher. A juicy rib eye on a plate? *Mais non*. And while the great American steak house has long been part of this country's landscape, there hadn't exactly been a rush to the borders to set up shop in far-away locales. Today, though, celebrity chefs from Emeril Lagasse to Gordon Ramsay to Bobby Flay are bringing world-class steak houses to places from Las Vegas to Buenos Aires to Singapore. The great steak restaurant is becoming a global phenomenon.

"From hamburgers to steaks, meat is really America's soul food," says Wolfgang Puck, one of the best known of the many celebrity chefs who have jumped into the high-end steak-house market. "The idea of accomplished chefs like Laurent Tourondel or Charlie Palmer doing steak is new, so chef-driven steak houses are gaining popularity. I think steak houses are an American tradition, and it is amazing today to see us exporting the concept, like my opening CUT, a modern version of the American steak house, in London and Singapore."

Steak may be one of society's most primal and simplest dishes, but it is still one where specialized steak houses enjoy advantages over home cooking, which also explains their recent popularity. The best restaurants dry-age their meat, an expensive process which greatly increases the cost and is generally



Angus porterhouse at Wolfgang Puck's CUT steak house

not considered safe for home cooks to attempt. Dry aging results in beef that is both tenderer and much richer. Likewise, many top steak houses flash-sear steaks at incredibly high temperatures, in excess of 700 degrees Fahrenheit, which is simply beyond the home kitchen's ability.

As demand has risen for the very best cuts, consumers find it harder to purchase such quality beef at the supermarket and increasingly have to use specialized purveyors — or eat out. “You can get Select and Choice in most supermarkets, but Prime beef is hardly in markets at all because of the tremendous price difference — it goes up 35 to 40 percent at wholesale between each level, and with dry-aged beef, it's more like 55 percent,” explains Stanley Lobel, owner of New York's famed Lobel's butcher shop, a boutique retailer of some of the finest meats available to consumers. “The availability of Prime is just 2 percent of all beef produced in the United States, and with more restaurants, it's scarcer and harder than ever for consumers to get.”

Fortunately, great steaks are easier than ever to get in restaurants — and better. As the sheer number of steak houses has grown, so too have their variety, quality, and hospitality. “The most obvious change has been in the look and feel,” notes Adam Rapoport, editor in chief of *Bon Appétit* magazine. “Steak houses no longer have to be bastions of masculinity. It turns out that friendly waiters and modern decor go great with a medium-rare porterhouse.”

Restaurants have also moved beyond ubiquitous side dishes such as creamed spinach and hash browns. Chef Michael Mina gives his creative appetizers and sides billing equal to that of the grass-fed, dry-aged beef at his Bourbon Steak and Stripsteak eateries, wowing customers with everything from beet-and-potato gnocchi to charred octopus. Likewise, Wolfgang Puck's CUT steak houses feature a vast array of rare, dry-aged steaks, but are equally loved for their gourmet cavatappi take on macaroni and cheese and highly original starters like apple salad with dates, almonds, and cheese.

“I think high-end steak houses offer more excitement now; you

Steak Speak:

Deciphering a modern-day steak-house menu

GRASS FED: Beef from cows that graze entirely or mostly on grass instead of grain, a once-standard but now rare (though common in Argentina) practice. Steaks are leaner and often slightly gamier.

CORN FED: Most U.S. cattle have a diet of corn, which makes them grow bigger faster and produces fattier meat — which many consider tastier.

CORN FINISHED: Some farmers graze cows on grass until older, then introduce corn — a hybrid of the two main dietary styles.

NATURAL: Beef that is raised without hormones or antibiotics; it has no artificial ingredients and is minimally processed.

KOBE BEEF: A legendarily tasty beef produced from the Tajima-gyu breed of cattle in Japan's Hyogo prefecture. Delicious in Japan, but USDA regulations forbid the import of any Japanese beef. Instead, Kobe beef on U.S. menus indicates steaks produced in a similar manner.

WAGYU BEEF: Literally “Japanese cattle,” Wagyu typically refers to historically Japanese breeds. While the USDA bars import of Japanese beef, there are reputable U.S. breeders who have raised pure lineages of these breeds. It's worth seeking out reputable restaurants indicating specific breeds and the farms supplying them.

PRIME: This designation from the USDA is typically given to about the top 2 percent of domestic beef, based on age and fat content.

DRY AGED: When meat is stored (usually 21 to 50 days) with proper temperature and air-circulation control, its connective tissues break down and water evaporates, making the meat tender, rich, and more concentrated in flavor. Most agree that dry aging improves flavor, often radically.



Bourbon Steak, Miami



Lobel's strip steak

don't just get iceberg lettuce and a tomato," says Puck. "It's more inventive in terms of appetizers, vegetables, and desserts. You also get different cuts, and more people are enjoying dry-aged beef now. I remember when hanger steak, flat iron, and tri-tip did not exist at restaurants. Years ago, no one served short ribs. Now they're on every menu."

While steak houses are all the rage, they are hardly all the same. Instead, they come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and styles, from ultramodern to stoically old school, truly offering something for everyone — even for seafood and poultry lovers. At one of the nation's oldest, most traditional, and most revered steak houses, Keens in New York, the specially sourced dry-aged steak is not even the star entree, an honor that goes to the restaurant's famous mutton chops.

And steak houses have another distinct advantage:

Cuts Above the Rest

Here are some of the world's worth-a-trip temples of steak.

KEENS STEAKHOUSE (New York City): Opened in 1885, it's been a haunt of Babe Ruth, Albert Einstein, Gen. MacArthur, and Teddy Roosevelt — and one of the few restaurants that still get to hand-select whole sides of beef at the market for in-house dry aging.

CUT (Las Vegas): In a city mad for steak, CUT wins with a huge variety of grass- and corn-fed aged and un-aged steaks, including some of the most reliable domestic Wagyu. Also offers a huge array of unique appetizers and sides. Additional locations in Beverly Hills, London, and Singapore.

BOURBON STEAK (Washington, D.C.): Michael Mina's eatery has taken the capital by storm with its winning combo of world-class steak, appetizers, and side dishes.

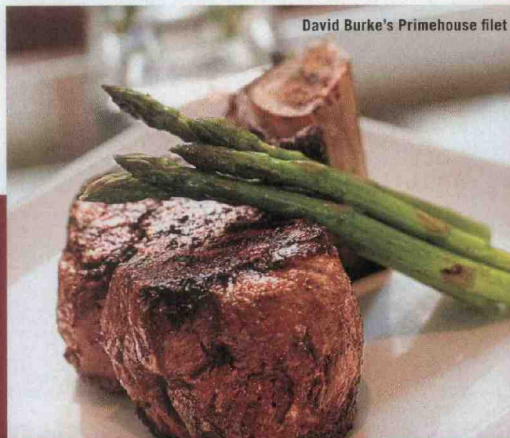
THE OAK DOOR (Tokyo): Many consider Japanese beef the world's finest, and this traveler-friendly eatery in the Grand Hyatt Tokyo offers all the nation's best, including Kobe and Hokkaido beef; Matsuzaka tenderloin; U.S. rib eye; and a selection of Australian beef.

SAVOY GRILL BY GORDON RAMSAY (London): When this venerable hotel received a \$100 million-plus facelift, so did its classic English Chophouse, now reinvigorated with first-rate service, the highest quality British rare-breed natural beef, and excellent traditional sides.



Savoy Grill's chef's table

They can survive even in a weak economy. When people eat out less, they want their meals to be special, and to many people "special" means a great steak. Says Ming Tsai, the James Beard Foundation Award-winning chef/owner of Blue Ginger outside Boston and host of *Simply Ming* on public television, "In most societies, having a bone-in rib eye or big piece of beef with a big red wine is real status. Everyone's talking health, but we're still pounding down steak like it's going out of style." **CL**



David Burke's Primehouse filet

DAVID BURKE'S PRIMEHOUSE (Chicago): "David built one wall of his dry-aging room out of slabs of pink Himalayan salt and it has this incredible effect of almost brining the meat, which is infused with flavor," says chef Ming Tsai. "I had a steak from room service and it was one of the best three — maybe best two — steaks I ever tasted. From room service! It's so delicious I can't believe it."

RED, THE STEAKHOUSE (Miami; Cleveland; and Boca Raton, Florida): Cleveland has been in the habit, lately, of sending some of its stars to Miami, and Red, the Steakhouse is no exception. The rib eye is standout and the service exceptional.

FERVOR (Buenos Aires): This steak spot in upscale Recoleta marries the traditional menu of Argentinean grass-fed meats and wood-fired parilla grill with dry aging, relatively unheard of here.

DEL FRISCO'S DOUBLE EAGLE (Dallas, other locations): The original Dallas restaurant spawned one of the most popular high-end steak house chains on earth, and now offers equally exquisite cuts in the less-formal Del Frisco's Grille.

Well-Seasoned Travelers:

Fortunately for road warriors, these other high-end steak restaurants can be found in many major cities around the U.S., ensuring that one is never too far from a great steak dinner:

BOB'S STEAK & CHOP HOUSE, bobs-steakandchop.com

THE CAPITAL GRILLE, thecapitalgrille.com

SMITH & WOLLENSKY'S, smithandwollensky.com

III FORKS, iiforks.com