



Making The Cut

Why stick to ribeye or striploin when oyster blades or intercostals can widen your steak-eating experience?

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BEYOND THE MENU of tender ribeye or hefty tomahawks lies a world of alternative or secondary cuts to explore. While less popular and typically tougher, the likes of oyster blade, karubi plate, intercostals (cut from between the ribs) and hanger steaks are steadily gaining traction with local steak lovers.

“There are two camps of customers,” says The Naked Finn’s Tan Ken Loon, who finds value and flavour in off-cuts. “Namely, beef lovers and Wagyu lovers. The latter will not like the ‘chewy’ kind of beef - dryaging the beef is an option to make it more tender - and some do not enjoy the ‘beefy’ flavours, as Wagyu tends not to have much of a beefy note.” He counts beef neck as one of his favourite cuts. Though too tough to chew as a steak, its rich flavour makes it extremely good when minced for meatballs and hamburger steaks, he says.

“For me, any steak needs to have a bite to it because chewing releases the juices and flavour, and that makes it much more enjoyable to eat,” says head chef Fabrice Mergalet of Argentinian restaurant Bochinche. “Steaks that melt in the mouth may be sought after, but you only taste beef fat, and not the real meat.”

For Chef Aitor Jeronimo Orive who helms Basque Kitchen by Aitor, alternative cuts like cheek, shank, rump, tongue and sweetbreads are ingredients that can be elevated if one “cooks them well with good technique”. Conversely, he adds, it takes a lot less effort and skill to handle a prime cut. Chef Aitor uses meat from older cattle (8-years-old) for his beefy Txuleta charcoal grilled Angus prime rib.

A spokesman from gourmet retailer Culina says that demand for alternative cuts is high as “they are more affordable and versatile”.

She adds, “Chefs today are more adventurous, and willing to try alternative cuts. The current message of sustainability also popularised the concept of nose to tail, making chefs more aware of the importance of reducing animal wastage.” Culina is the exclusive local distributor for Westholme, a beef brand based in Queensland. Over the years, Culina has also seen an upward trend of local customers buying alternative cuts.

“Every cut provides a slightly different eating experience - this will differ depending on the type of cattle and more importantly, the cooking method - but many of these ‘alternate’ cuts have a stronger flavour than the usual cuts,” says Mark Harris, Global Sales Manager at Stanbroke, a family-owned Australian company that specializes in the entire beef production process from “paddock to plate”. Stanbroke, distributed by Classic Fine Foods in Singapore, offers secondary cuts such as tri-tip and flank steak from both their Augustus brand of grain-finished cattle (raised on natural pastures before moving to a customised grain ration for 100 days) and Sanchoku Wagyu brand.

The greatest misconception, according to Terry Farrell, Global Brand Ambassador for Westholme, is that “alternative cuts will not offer the same great eating experience as the better-known cuts.” Although, “this perspective is surely changing with alternative cuts coming into the spotlight in recent years”.

Mr Farrell attributes this willingness to embrace change and explore new products to diners in Singapore being “more educated, well-travelled and discerning, which directly influences their perspectives on food”.

For him, “the hanging tender (hanger steak) is a great example of how chefs and diners’ relationship with a cut can change. For many years it was referred to as the ‘butcher’s’ cut as it was almost unsaleable, so butchers would keep it for themselves and enjoy its unique flavour and tenderness. Luckily, chefs and diners have now discovered this hidden gem,” Farrell says.

Chef Mergalet, who serves a charcoalgrilled Westholme Wagyu hanger steak (which ‘hangs’ from the diaphragm of a cow) aged for 31 days, says that even though the hanger steak is more accessible nowadays, it is still quite uncommon to find them aged. While the aged hanger steak has gotten more popular, the charcoal-grilled Ojo de Bife Rib-eye Steak from Argentina remains their best-seller.

“We use alternative cuts because they are delicious and it offers guests a chance to try something they may not usually eat,” says David Pynt, chef-owner of Burnt Ends, recently named number 10 on Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants list. The onglet (another name for hanger steak), rump cap and the elusive iliocostalis are some of his favourite cuts.

Chef Pynt explains that the iliocostalis (a muscle that runs along the spine) at Burnt Ends is marinated in shio koji, mustard and rosemary overnight before grilling hard up to an internal temperature of 56°C.

Besides the more well-known cuts of beef such as the ribeye and striploin, Josephine Loke, Chef de Cuisine of 665°F, Andaz Singapore, also serves flank steak, a lean cut with lots of intense beef flavour.

“Flank steak comes from the muscular abdominal side of the animal and has many muscle fibers running in a single direction, thus making it tougher than other cuts of beef but also more flavourful. It is not an easy cut to cook as it overcooks easily, resulting in a very tough and chewy bite if prepared incorrectly,” says Chef Loke, who uses a flank cut of Tajima Wagyu beef from Australia. Although it’s lean, the marbling of the Tajima Wagyu coupled with the use of their Pira oven yields a juicy and tender steak. The high heat of the Pira oven allows the meat to obtain a beautiful outer crust quicker while cooking evenly through the meat, which means it takes less time compared to a conventional grill, and retains its tenderness, she adds.

Riding on the increasing popularity of good-value alternative cuts, Sheen Jet Leong made a splash with The Feather Blade, a popup he founded that serves only the feather blade (or flat iron) cut.

“The feather blade is from the cattle’s shoulder, nestled within the oyster blade. It’s a fairly unknown cut. We ensure that it is portioned out without any sinew and for optimal tenderness and juiciness, we recommend cooking it medium rare.” says Mr Leong, who describes the feather blade to have the perfect balance of flavour, juiciness and tenderness. The steaks are simply dressed with salt and browned butter to allow the flavour of the meat to shine. Mr Leong shares that the feather blade cut (priced at \$21) has been very well received, pleasantly surprising those who tried the cut for the first time.

“We’ve even been told by some that it’s the best steak they’ve ever had,” he says. In fact, business has been so good that he is now keen to explore having a permanent space. The pop-up steakhouse located at Zui Hong Lou, 90 Club Street, is currently open till April 28, and only on Fridays to Sundays from 5:30pm. Will wagyu or tenderloin lovers switch over for a bite? It’s something to chew on for sure.