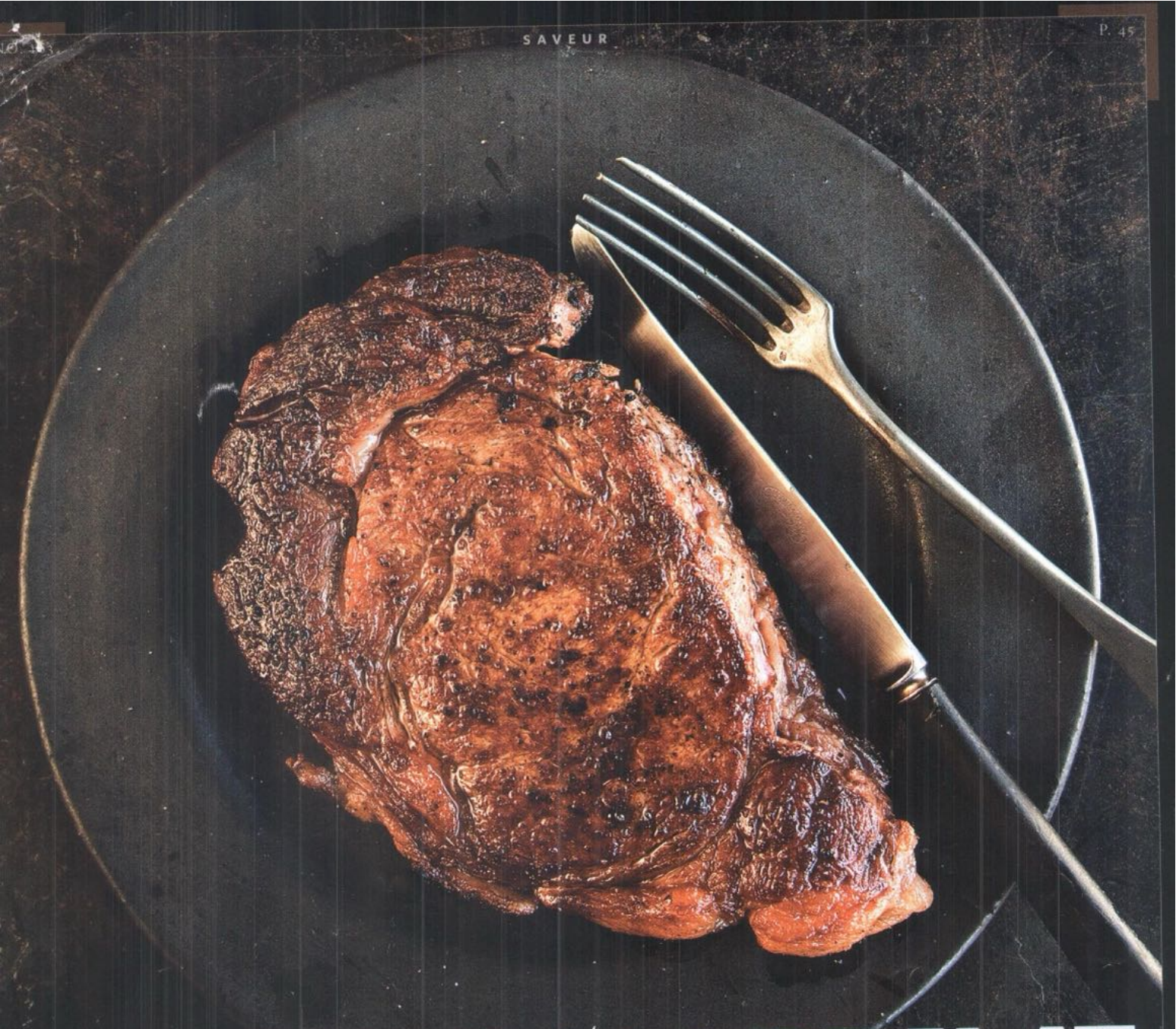


AMERICAN PRIME

NO OTHER FOOD arouses our appetite like a just-grilled steak. Lightly charred on the outside, juicy and tender within, and garlanded by luscious fat, it promises satisfaction both primal and refined. Little wonder, then, that it has attained an almost mythic status in our culinary culture. Indeed, the story of steak—the ways we cook and eat it and, just as important, the ways we raise the cattle it comes from—continues to unfold alongside the story of our nation itself.

by BETTY FUSSELL | *photographs by* ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI *and* BARBARA RIES

An unadorned grilled rib eye, above, is a meal unto itself; facing page and following pages, scenes from La Cense ranch in southwestern Montana.

NOTHING EXPRESSES the flavor of beef better than a good steak—an ability that owes, in part, to the food's simplicity. The quick cooking over high heat of a modest-size cut of beef, taken from any of the more tender muscles of a steer, is a triumphant union of practicality and taste. Though steak has European origins—the word itself is derived from the Old Norse *steikja*, which means to roast on a spit—it is fair to say that the food didn't really come into its own until it crossed the Atlantic. Indeed, steak has in many ways become a symbol of the American dream: it is both a staple of the workingman's table and an icon of material achievement.

Our country's appetite for beef and, particularly, steak has fundamentally changed the social, economic, and even physical landscape of the United States. It has made entrepreneurs rich, spawned cities and towns, launched restaurant empires, and inspired a culinary lexicon all its own. Yet it remains an enduring emblem of our frontier history, evoking the legendary romance, innocence, and violence of the American West. In fact, if you want to go to the source of some of the best American steak, you still have to travel to the country's Western states, to places like the 88,000-acre La Cense Montana ranch, in the southwestern part of that state, one of the oldest continuously operating cattle ranches in the country, established in 1869.

Although a century and a half of industrialization has helped make steak as commonplace as bread in many American households, beef producers like La Cense are returning to more-meticulous ranching methods that reflect the way cattle used to be raised in this country (and still are in places like Argentina)—that is, on native pastureland. Their labors are yielding some of the most extraordinary steaks I have ever tasted—marbled and juicy and cut from Black Angus steers and heifers that eat nothing but grass in their lifetime. For me, visiting La Cense—and seeing how such an enterprise fits into the complicated history of beef in America—is key to understanding, in a visceral, historical, and economic sense, where my steak comes from.

FIRST A PAIR OF TINY black hooves appears, followed by the nose, the head, and, with an earth-shaking moo from the mother, the rest of a newborn calf, which lands in the cool grass right in front of me. Mama turns to lick her

Marinated flank steak, facing page; right, dry-aged whole short loins at Peter Luger steak house in New York.

METHOD

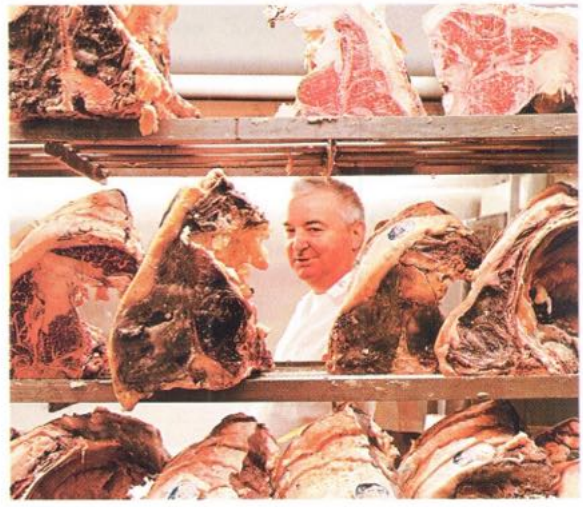
Marinated Flank Steak

The flavorful cut of beef known as flank steak (facing page) also frequently goes by the name london broil. Toast 1 tbsp. black peppercorns, 1 tbsp. coriander seeds, 1 tbsp. fennel seeds, 2 broken dried chiles de àrbol, and 2 fresh bay leaves in a small skillet over high heat, stirring occasionally, until fragrant, 2–3 minutes. Transfer aromatics to a hard surface; lightly crush with the bottom of a heavy skillet; then transfer to a 9" x 13" baking dish. Add 1/2 cup red wine, 2 tbsp. red wine vinegar, 2 tbsp. worcestershire, 4 crushed cloves garlic, 2 sprigs fresh rosemary, and 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil; whisk to combine. Poke one 2-lb. flank steak (see page 63) all over with a fork and place in marinade; spoon some marinade over top. Cover and refrigerate, turning occasionally, for 12–24 hours. An hour before grilling, transfer steak to a plate; set aside at room temperature. Transfer marinade to a small pot and bring just to a boil; set aside. Build a medium-hot charcoal fire in your grill. Grill steak, turning once and, using a brush, basting with reserved marinade occasionally, until browned and medium rare, 7–8 minutes per side. Transfer to a cutting board, tent with foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Carve steak into thin slices on the bias and serve with any accumulated juices. Serves 4.

COMING OF AGE

FORGET THE "FRESHER IS BETTER" rule, which applies to most meat: when it comes to beef, age is an asset. All beef—even shrink-wrapped supermarket cuts—undergoes a period of aging that tenderizes the meat, gently breaking down muscle fibers and, in some cases, ripening its flavor. Aging is especially important for steak, which is usually cooked quickly over high heat (as opposed to slower, tenderizing methods like braising).

The traditional technique, dry aging, is an art practiced by old-school butchers, meat distributors, and steak house chefs. Meat is stored in temperature- and humidity-controlled environments, gradually losing water weight and developing a rind, which is carved away. Aging time varies: some butchers believe two



weeks is enough, while others age cuts for three weeks or more to concentrate flavor to a deep, nutty intensity. It's a time-consuming process, but it's essential for the best results. The difficulty of maintaining the ideal temperature and humidity—conditions crucial for preventing bacterial contamination—eliminates dry aging at home as an option for most people. Dry aging is still practiced by relatively few. In fact, 90 percent of retail-marketed beef is wet-aged.

In wet aging, cuts are vacuum-sealed in plastic after slaughter and remain there until they're butchered for sale—on average, 23 days. Some argue that, beyond tenderizing the beef, wet aging does little more than prolong shelf life and reduce cost; by contrast with dry-aged beef, wet-aged meat suffers comparably little loss in volume, but it also does not gain markedly in flavor. Others argue, however, that because wet aging allows beef to retain its moisture, it tends to produce juicier results. —*B.F.*

FACING PAGE: BARBARA RIES; THIS PAGE: ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI

Steak remains an enduring symbol of our frontier history, evoking the mythic romance, innocence, and violence of the American West

IS IT DONE YET?

WHEN IT COMES TO COOKING a steak, most restaurant cooks have the seemingly magical ability to take the meat off the heat at exactly the right time. For most of us at home, however, learning to cook a steak to perfection is a process of trial and error. But take heart: you don't need X-ray vision to divine the color of the inside of a thick steak; just some basic know-how.

As a steak cooks, its flesh becomes firmer and loses its red color, proceeding from "blue" (nearly raw) to rare (deep red) to medium rare (deep pink) to medium (light pink) to medium well (gray with a hint of pink) to well-done (gray throughout). Many agree that medium rare is usually the level that brings out a steak's best qualities. Indeed, any steak from the chuck or the round of a steer should be cooked no further, since those firm, hardworking muscles will quickly become chewy.

The most important thing to remember before turning on the flame is that steaks cook fast (especially those from lean, grass-fed cattle). Also know that a meat thermometer usually isn't a good option, since it's hard to get a reliable reading using most standard models; also, following many published guidelines for judging doneness by temperature—including those issued by the USDA—will ensure that your steak is overcooked. Many tricks have been devised over the years for determining the doneness of a steak. Some cooks do it by checking firmness: an old (and, we've found, unreliable) rule says a rare steak should feel like the soft flesh of the crook of the hand when it's unclenched. Others follow a ten-minutes-per-inch rule.

But for our money—and when we're shelling out for a prime-grade porterhouse, that's not an inconsiderable factor—the single best solution is the tried-and-true "nick and peek" method. Make a small cut in the steak, take a look inside, and judge the color for yourself. Until you've confidently mastered your own method, though, err on the side of caution and take the steak off slightly before you think it's achieved its desired doneness. Also keep in mind that with thicker steaks, lean cuts (like filet mignon) cook faster than fattier ones (like rib eye) and that the presence of a bone prolongs cooking time. —*Todd Coleman*

baby clean while Dan Hill, a 66-year-old La Cense cowboy who wears a miner's lamp strapped to his hat, puts a drop of antiseptic on the umbilical cord and attaches a numbered tag to the calf's ear. This is the fourth birth of the night; by tomorrow night there'll be a dozen more, adding to a herd that already comprises roughly 700 steers, 2,000 mother cows, 1,000 yearlings, and 2,000 calves.

During spring calving season, Hill and the other ranch employees are as much medical technicians as cowboys. Using ultrasound, they were able to predict exactly when the cow we've just watched give birth would go into labor. Sometimes, Hill tells me, if the mother takes too long, they'll move her into the calving barn, a maternity ward–like facility. If a mother has twins, they'll take one of the calves and feed it by hand every six hours until they find a surrogate mother who's lost her own calf—since one of a pair of twins left with its birth mother most often won't survive once it enters the herd.

"You can't learn it from books," 69-year-old ranch manager Bud Griffith tells me the next morning as he shows me around the ranch's facilities. "Cowboying's a way of life." But as I learned last night, that doesn't mean that ranchers like Griffith and Hill are stuck in some storybook past.

William Kriegel, La Cense's 62-year-old owner, is one of a growing number of advocates of what's known as "natural ranching". For Kriegel, a native of France who owned an energy company before becoming involved in ranching two decades ago, that means running a ranch that integrates cattle raising with programs focused on equine studies. It also means operating outside the industrialized beef system—where more than 99 percent of American beef comes from—and not placing blind faith in USDA descriptions like "prime" and "choice", which identify fat content and age as the major determinants of flavor (see "Making the Grade", page 65). It also means raising hormone- and antibiotic-free cattle whose meat can be called exclusively grass-finished—that is, animals that have grazed in open pasture from birth to slaughter.

These practices represent a dramatic departure from the way most beef is generated in the *(continued on page 54)*

BETTY FUSSELL, *author of* The Story of Corn *(Knopf, 1992) and* My Kitchen Wars *(North Point Press, 1999), is writing a history of American beef, to be published next year by Harcourt.*

RECIPE

Filets Mignons with Mushroom Sauce

SERVES 4

This luscious sauce adds complex flavor to filet mignon (right), a mild-tasting cut.

- 6 tbsp. butter, cut into small pieces
- 3 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 8-oz. filets mignons (see page 61)
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 shallots, finely chopped
- 1 lb. cremini mushrooms, sliced
- 1 cup red wine
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 2 tsp. cornstarch, mixed with 1 tbsp. water
- 2 tbsp. mixed chopped chives and parsley
- 2 tbsp. sherry

Heat oven to 500°. Heat 1 tbsp. butter and 1 tbsp. oil in a large skillet over high heat. Season filets with salt and pepper; sear, flipping once, until browned, 4–5 minutes. Transfer filets to a baking sheet; roast in oven until medium rare, 4–5 minutes. Transfer filets to a plate. Return skillet to medium-high heat. Add 1 tbsp. butter, remaining oil, and shallots; cook for 1 minute. Add mushrooms; cook for 5 minutes. Add red wine; bring to a boil. Reduce to medium; cook until syrupy, 8–10 minutes. Add stock; reduce slightly, 4–5 minutes. Whisk in cornstarch mixture; bring to a boil. Add sherry; cook until thickened, 2–3 minutes. Remove from heat; whisk in remaining butter, herbs, and salt and pepper. Serve filets with mushroom sauce.

Demand for steak soared at the turn of the 19th century, but as early as 1882, *Harper's Weekly* was already heralding what it called the "era of cheap beef"

TOP: MICHAEL KRAUS; FACING PAGE: ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI

THE HALLOWED HALLS OF BEEF

CATTLE AND CAPITALISM go together like gin and tonic, and with good reason: where there's beef, there's money. And nothing embodies this sacred union more perfectly than that most venerable of American gastronomic institutions, the steak house. You know the place: the cocktails are generously poured, the cigar smoke is thick, the bill is hefty, and the unadorned prime steaks are charred, juicy, and beautiful. And yet, despite the high-roller trappings, there's something undeniably down-to-earth about a steak house meal. What's more, for all the nostalgia surrounding them, steak houses are still *the* places to get great steak in this country.

These great American establishments haven't always represented a high-end splurge, though, at least according to Andrew F. Smith, editor of *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink* (Oxford University Press, 2007). The historian traces the roots of steak houses to the convivial dining halls that were common across Europe as early as the 1500s and also to the no-frills working-class chophouses and beefsteak clubs of Victorian-era Britain. The first recognizable forebears of today's steak houses started appearing in the big northeastern cities of the United States in the late 18th century. These so-called chop houses and porterhouses (named for the porter-style beer customarily served there) usually served large cuts from the short loin of British-breed steer and heifers. Early recipes stipulated that the steaks be pan-fried, but eventually they were grilled or broiled and served starkly on a plate.

The real heyday for steak houses arrived in the late 19th century, when the advent of the refrigerated railcar permitted the shipment of huge quantities of beef to the great meatpacking centers of Chicago and New York, where a robust and distinctly masculine beef-eating culture flourished. The 1894 publication of *The Epicurean*, published by New York's legendary Delmonico's restaurant, includes almost 100 recipes for steak, many of them presumably named for the deep-pocketed characters who'd dined there over the years. By the turn of the century, beefsteak had become so popular as the meal of choice for large gatherings of men that the word came to describe not only the food but also the event itself. A rollicking "beefsteak", complete with beer and entertainment, became a staple at social clubs and speakeasies, especially during Prohibition. Over time, women—and the fancy airs they brought with them—invaded these citadels, a development lamented in a 1939 *New Yorker* article by the essayist Joseph Mitchell. "For generations men had worn their second-best suits because of the inevitability of grease spots," Mitchell wrote. "Tuxedos and women appeared simultaneously."

Cooking methods and the choice of cuts at classic steak houses vary and are the subject of endless debate. The kitchen at New York's Peter Luger (see "Magnificent Seven", right), for example, slices its signature broiled porterhouse before it's served, creating a striking presentation but allowing—so say the critics—precious juices to drain onto the plate, while Sparks, another archetypal New York steak house, brings its massive sirloin to the table whole. Regional variations on the steak house theme have also evolved: Texans, for example, seem to like them big, while New York and Las Vegas have welcomed the arrival of high-profile chefs and vastly expanded menu offerings, including all manner of grass-fed and heritage-breed beef. —*Josh Ozersky, online food editor of* New York *magazine and author of* Meat Me in Manhattan *(Gamble Guides, 2003)*

Karl Zartler, facing page, a waiter at New York City's famed Peter Luger, one of the country's oldest and best-loved steak houses.

MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Whatever their particular character, all good steak houses honor a pledge to send us on our way full, perhaps a little tipsy, and deeply satisfied. Listed alphabetically below are seven establishments—some old, some new—that we think are carrying on that tradition admirably. **(See THE PANTRY, page 96, for more information.)**

1 | *Bern's Steak House, Tampa* **Going strong since 1956, Bern's is frequently singled out by connoisseurs as the best steak house in America, in large part because the steaks can be ordered to the customer's desired thickness to within a half inch and to eight different degrees of doneness. The wine list—incidentally, a relatively new addition to the steak house formula—is one of the nation's largest.**

2 | *Craftsteak, Las Vegas and New York* **These newcomers from restaurateur Tom Colicchio could be considered the steak houses of the future, and not only for their modish leather banquettes. With an ingredient-focused menu—a theme borrowed from the Manhattan parent restaurant, Craft—Craftsteak limits its sourcing to particular ranches and eschews industrial feedlot beef.**

3 | *Five O'Clock Steakhouse, Milwaukee* **It's nearly impossible to score a reservation at this 1960s-era supper club, formerly known as Coerper's Five O'Clock Club; its desirability and clubby atmosphere are only half the fun, though. The gigantic steaks are deeply browned under furnacelike broilers and emerge tender and juicy in the center. Go with the rib eye: a fattier cut, it arrives practically sizzling.**

4 | *Gene and Georgetti, Chicago* **This 40-year-old, burnished-wood artifact still exudes an unmistakably masculine vibe. The restaurant attracts both tourists and Chicagoland burghers, who look as built into the place as the bricks and mortar. Everyone gets the same superb steaks and chops, though.**

5 | *Gorat's Steak House, Omaha* **This homey restaurant, which opened in 1944, bills itself as a New York–style Italian steak house, but it's perhaps best known as super-investor Warren Buffet's favorite hangout. The real draw is the T-bone; it's cooked on a flat metal griddle that browns the steak beautifully.**

6 | *Pacific Dining Car, Los Angeles* **This restaurant began its life 86 years ago as a freestanding dining car and has matured over the years into a stellar steak house. The elegant, family-run restaurant's reputation revolves around hand-selected meats—the best of which are the strips and rib eyes—grilled over mesquite coals.**

7 | *Peter Luger, Brooklyn, New York* **Founded in 1887, Peter Luger is thought by many to have set the standard for steak house quality; the owners still personally select the very best prime meat, which helps account for the menu's lofty prices. New York boasts a number of other first-class steak houses, but for sheer consistency, Luger leads the pack. —*J.O.***

THE RIGHT WINE

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, if steak is the meal, red is the color. No matter the cut or the preparation, it is a food that almost always benefits from a dry red wine's tannic structure and depth of flavor. When it comes to marrying steak to red wine, the array of suitors is vast, but a few basic rules of thumb can help guide your choices.

A firm wine from tough-skinned grapes—say, a young California cabernet sauvignon like the Rodney Strong Vineyard Sonoma County 2003 ($19)—complements a thick, heavily marbled steak because the meat's fat will mute the tannins' otherwise astringent effect. A wine like this might seem excessive if drunk on its own, but it will feel smooth and balanced with a skillet-cooked porterhouse such as the one shown on page 66. Softer-textured cuts of beef—like the filets mignons with mushroom sauce on page 51—don't demand such a tightly structured wine and tend to pair better with a suppler but still substantial red: a Chilean merlot, perhaps, such as Concha y Toro's sumptuous Marques de Casa Concha 2004 ($19).

A wine's depth and complexity, especially if coming from earthy or spicy notes, also contribute to a successful steak match. These secondary, nonfruit attributes—evocative of the climate and soil in which the grapes matured—give many wines their widely recognized signatures. In France's northern Rhône Valley, for instance, syrah yields wines with a bouquet redolent of crushed black pepper; accordingly, a red like the Domaine Belle Crozes-Hermitage Cuvée Louis Belle 2004 ($37) would be a great choice with a dish like the strip steaks with green pepper sauce shown on page 64. In Australia's Barossa Valley, the same grape (there called shiraz) tends to produce wines with flavors reminiscent of black licorice and chocolate, so a wine like the Langmeil Valley Floor 2005 ($25) is just the thing to pair with the marinated flank steak shown on page 48 or with other fairly lean cuts that will benefit from the intense but slightly sweet character of shiraz.

For vivid preparations like the Vietnamese-style steak shown at right, look for reds that have a spicy edge. California zinfandel can be a good choice, as long as it's not too heavy or alcoholic; the Quivira 2004 from the Dry Creek Valley ($20) would be a fine pick. And for slow-cooked dishes like the swiss steak on the facing page, look for uncomplicated reds with plenty of personality but supple texture; a good, moderately priced malbec from Argentina such as a Dolium's 2004 ($11) should do the trick. (See THE PANTRY, page 96, to find the wines mentioned above.) —*Paul Lukacs*

ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI (2)

(continued from page 50) U.S. nowadays and, at the same time, a return to methods that flourished prior to World War II. It is impossible to calculate exactly how many producers are raising grass-finished cattle, since many do not market their meat as such. According to data compiled by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, natural and organic (which generally means hormone- and additive-free) beef accounts for less than 2 percent of U.S. retail beef sales—but its sector is growing faster than that of conventional retail-marketed beef.

IN 2000, WHEN Kriegel bought La Cense from the Japanese-owned company that had owned it for 12 years, the cattle being raised there started their lives on the ranch's grasslands but were, like most beef cattle in this country, soon ushered onto the assembly line of the commodity beef system—a network of feedlots and packing plants, where the steer are butchered into manageable cuts for retailers. Cattle processed under this system are first sent to a feeder, or "backgrounder", whose job is to prepare the cows' stomachs for

"You can't learn it from books," says ranch manager Bud Griffith. "Cowboying's a way of life." But that doesn't mean cattlemen like him are stuck in a storybook past

the highly concentrated grains, corn, and soy-based feed that will compose the diet on which the animals are "finished"—a procedure that rapidly adds a cushion of flavorful fat to the meat—prior to slaughter.

Though the raising of cattle on grain and corn is now the dominant method, doing so on a large scale is a relatively new development. In fact, it was grass that enabled Americans to enjoy such a bounty of beef in the first place. Beginning in the decades before the Civil War, the expansion of the American frontier opened cattle raising, which first flourished on small livestock farms in the Northeast, to the seemingly limitless grasslands of the Western territories. Those vast pastures beckoned with a year-round buffet of highly nutritious grasses that didn't require tending.

While the livestock farmers of the East favored long-established British breeds, ranchers of the West and Southwest preferred the Texas longhorn, a hardy and semiwild variety descended from *(continued on page 58)*

METHODS

Thit Bò Bít-Tết

(Vietnamese-Style Steak)

The recipe for this dish (facing page) is based on one in *Into the Vietnamese Kitchen* by Andrea Nguyen (Ten Speed Press, 2006). Stir together 6 tbsp. Maggi seasoning sauce (see page 91), 6 tbsp. canola oil, 1½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper, and 12 finely chopped cloves garlic in a wide, shallow dish. Add 2 top sirloin steaks (about 3 lbs. in all; see page 60); rub all over with marinade. Cover; let marinate at room temperature for 30 minutes. Remove steaks from marinade; scrape off most of the garlic. Heat a large cast-iron skillet over medium heat. Add 1 steak and cook until well browned, 3–4 minutes; flip steak and cook until medium rare, 2–3 minutes more. Transfer steak to a cutting board; tent with foil. Repeat process with remaining steak. Thinly slice both steaks across the grain. Serve with rice, any accumulated juices (Nguyen likes to stir her rice in the skillet with the pan juices), and a dash or two more of Maggi seasoning sauce. Serves 4–6.

Swiss Steak

Swiss steak (left) may derive its name from the process of "swissing" textiles, in which cloth is pressed between rollers to soften it. Heat oven to 350°. Heat 1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil and 1 tbsp. butter in a dutch oven over medium-high heat. Put ¾ cup flour on a wide plate. Season one 2½"-thick top round steak (about 3 lbs.; see page 61) generously all over with salt and pepper, then dredge both sides in flour. Brown steak in dutch oven, turning once, until deep golden brown, 12–14 minutes in all. Transfer steak to a large plate; wipe clean. Heat 1 tbsp. butter and 1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil in dutch oven over medium heat. Add 4 finely chopped cloves garlic, 2 whole cloves, 1 finely chopped onion, 1 finely chopped carrot, 1 finely chopped rib celery, and 1 bay leaf and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened, 6–8 minutes. Stir in 2 tbsp. tomato paste, 1 tbsp. sweet paprika, and salt and pepper to taste and cook, stirring occasionally, until caramelized, 5–6 minutes. Meanwhile, tie 8 flat-leaf sprigs parsley and 3 sprigs thyme together with butcher's twine; add to pot along with two 12-oz. bottles beer and one 28-oz. can whole peeled tomatoes (with purée), crushing them with your hands as you add them. Bring to a boil; add reserved steak. Cover dutch oven with foil, then the lid. Transfer dutch oven to oven; braise for 1 hour. Uncover dutch oven, flip steak over, and add one 12-oz. bottle beer; cover again with foil and lid. Return to oven; braise steak until tender, about 1 hour more. Uncover dutch oven and discard foil; return to oven. Cook until sauce has thickened and steak has browned, 15–20 minutes more. Discard herb bundle. Season sauce with salt and pepper; transfer to a large platter. Sprinkle with 2 tbsp. chopped flat-leaf parsley, if you like. Serves 6.

As with all great American foods, steak has been adapted to the culinary traditions of our own regional cultures—and of those beyond our borders

LET THEM EAT SIRLOIN

IT COULD BE SAID THAT Americans, at least those who came of age after World War II, have come to think of a hearty steak dinner less as a privilege than as an inalienable right. Few institutions better exemplify this line of thinking than budget steak houses, those Western-themed franchise restaurants—some of them cafeteria style, some sit-down—that have become fixtures of strip malls and interstates. They have names like Bonanza, Sizzler, and Ponderosa, and their menus promise a full steak meal at rock-bottom prices. The steaks are often a thin cut from the chuck or sirloin section—as opposed to the giant porterhouses and filets mignons favored by upscale steak houses—but they rarely fail to satisfy.

Suburban budget steak houses began to appear in the 1950s and '60s; among the first was Sizzler, which was the brainchild of a California salesman named Del Johnson. He got the idea for his restaurant in 1958 after reading about a steak joint in San Francisco called Tad's, which offered faux-Victorian décor and a T-bone steak dinner for $1.09. (Tad's later inspired a chain of its own.) A few months later, Johnson and his wife, Helen, opened Del's Sizzler Steak House in Culver City, California, making use of a building owned by the father-in-law of his friend Jim Collins, who ran the hamburger stand next door. Del's Sizzler sold two kinds of steak, a top sirloin and a new york cut, accompanied by a baked potato and a green salad adorned with a single cherry tomato.

"He used a wood platter with a hot metal plate in the center that made the steak sizzle," Collins says. "That's where the name came from."

Johnson managed to undersell Tad's by a full ten cents. By the time he sold his business to his friend Collins and two of Collins's partners, in 1967, there were four company-owned restaurants, 160 franchises around the country, and a growing number of imitators. During a boom in fast-food franchising during the 1960s and '70s, hundreds of budget steak houses cropped up around the country, all offering similar menus and reasonable prices. "When you get a new concept that's doing well, other people come along and try to do something with it," says Collins. "Sizzler definitely spawned a few." With 307 franchises operating today, Sizzler is still going strong amid all that competition. —*Todd Coleman*

(continued from page 55) a herd first brought to North America by Spanish colonialists in the 19th century. Longhorns were prized not for their meat but for their endurance: they could survive with little food and water on the trails—which were often more than 1,000 miles long—to the auction houses of great meatpacking cities like Kansas City and Chicago. The cattle in those massive herds, sometimes 2,500 strong, invariably arrived at their destination skinny and bedraggled—conditions that made for tough and bland beef. And so, in a foreshadowing of methods that would be adopted on a much larger scale many decades later, meatpackers in the cities took to fattening the animals on grain or corn in stockyard pens before slaughtering them.

The laying of rail across the West, however, reduced the toll the trails took on the texture of the beef; soon ranchers began loading cattle onto railcars that covered large parts of the journey. And by the mid-1880s, cattle were being slaughtered close to where they were raised and shipped in refrigerated railcars to meatpackers. Soon, cattlemen began looking to breeds that fared better on the plate and found them in the British Hereford and Scottish Black Angus. These were eventually crossbred with the Texas longhorn, as well as with other legendary European beef breeds—including France's Charolais and Italy's Chianina—for the creation of even more flavorful beef.

By the turn of the 19th century, the introduction of feedlots, among other factors, had made beef more abundant than ever, and an emerging restaurant culture in cities like Chicago and New York sent the demand for steak soaring. (As early as 1882, *Harper's Weekly* had was already heralding what it dubbed the "era of cheap beef".) In the years before World War II, streamlined mechanization and advances in feeding and processing, combined with an oversupply of corn, set the stage for a seismic shift, away from birth-to-slaughter pasture raising and toward corn feeding. That shift seemed to please both consumers and producers: since corn-fed cattle put on fat faster than their grass-fed brethren, cattlemen could bring their animals to market sooner; and diners eventually came to favor the taste and texture of corn-fed beef, in part because of its fattiness and also because the steer were slaughtered at an earlier, and literally more tender, age.

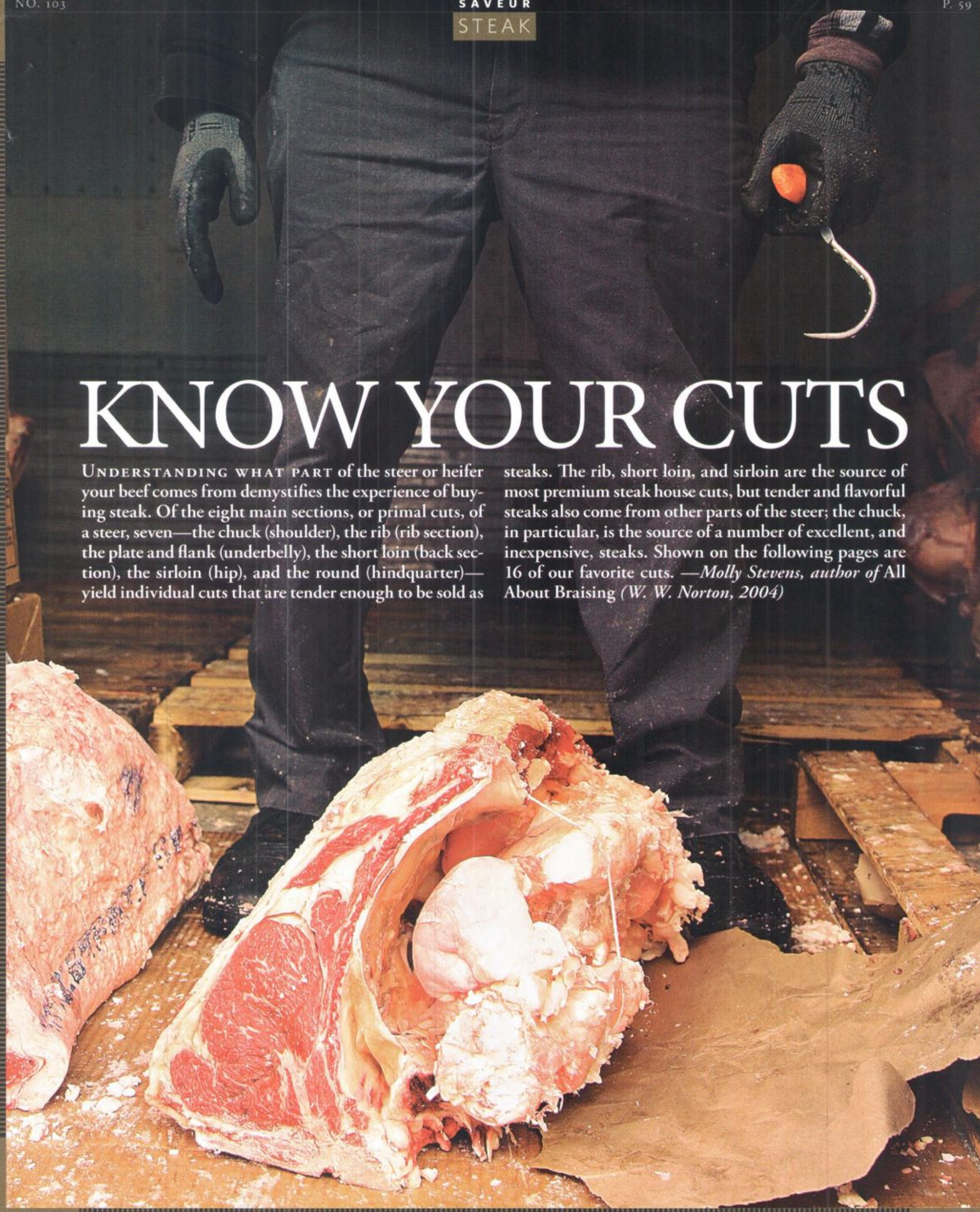
AMERICANS EAT A lot of beef—the $49 billion–a–year beef industry is our country's most lucrative agricultural sector—and of all the standard cuts available, those that are sold as steaks (see "Know Your Cuts", facing page), though costlier, are the favorite choice of Americans. To cite another index of popularity: over the past five years, sales at restaurants classifying themselves as steak houses (see "The Hallowed Halls of Beef", page 53) have increased by 13 percent each year, despite an ever more crowded field. In New York City, for example, old-guard steak houses like Peter Luger and Sparks have been joined by chef-driven newcomers like BLT Steak, Porter House New York, and Craftsteak. Chain steak houses, too, are proliferating (see "Let Them Eat Sirloin", left).

That consumers want more steak variety is hardly a secret to restaurateurs, whose offerings today include everything from classic prime-graded sirloins from Black Angus steer—still one of the breeds of choice for conventional beef in this country, in part because the cattle put on weight fast—to expensive cuts from Japanese steer (like the Wagyu, the source of ultratender Kobe-style beef) and other old breeds that offer nuanced flavors and textures. And they are turning to ranchers of grass-fed beef, whose steaks exhibit *(continued on page 65)*

The owners of Peter Luger steak house in Brooklyn, New York, hand-select short loin cuts directly from the truck, right.

MICHAEL KRAUS; FACING PAGE: ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI

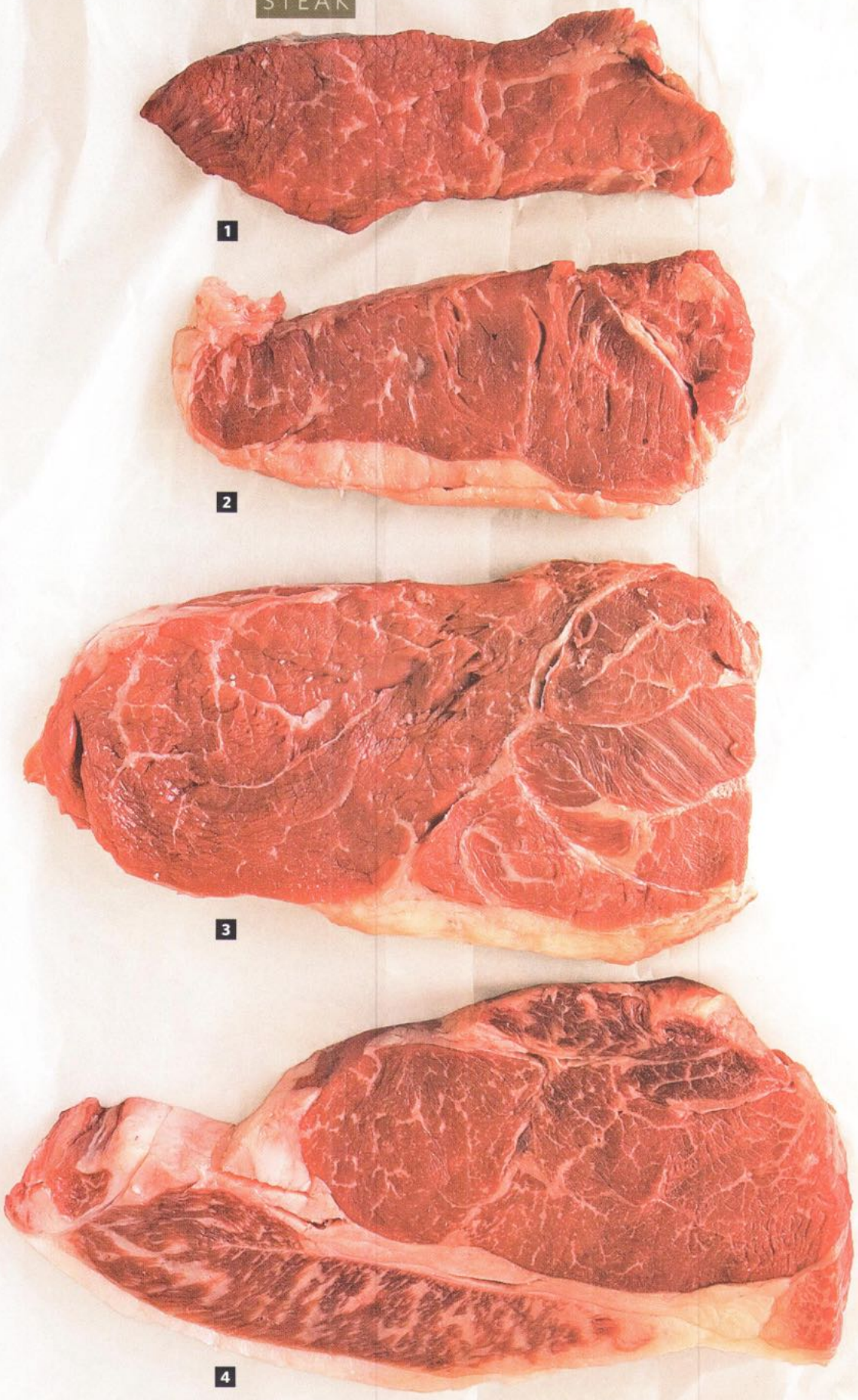
Today, steak houses and specialty stores offer everything from prime-graded Black Angus sirloin to steaks made from grass-fed and heritage-breed cattle



KNOW YOUR CUTS

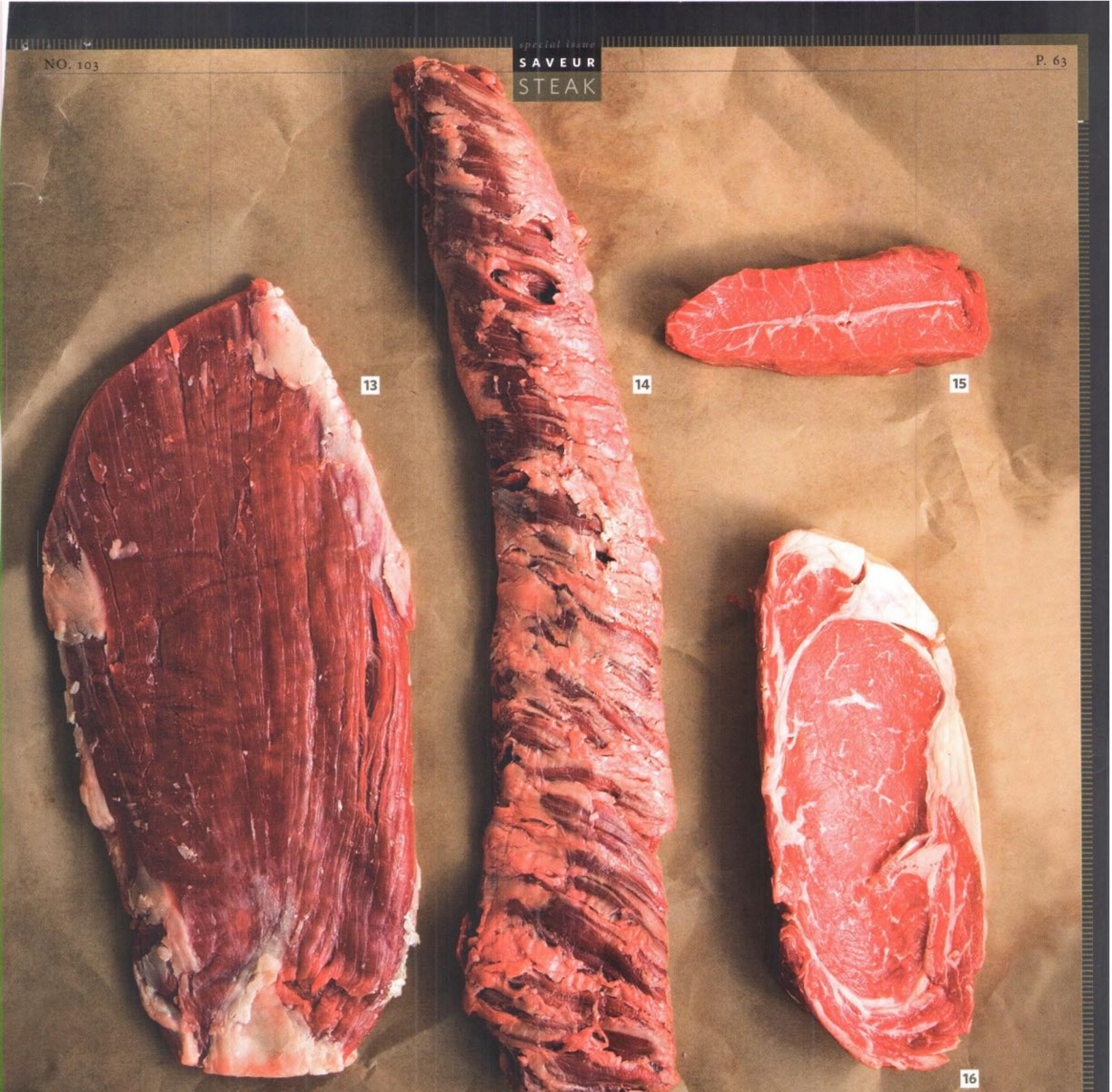
UNDERSTANDING WHAT PART of the steer or heifer your beef comes from demystifies the experience of buying steak. Of the eight main sections, or primal cuts, of a steer, seven—the chuck (shoulder), the rib (rib section), the plate and flank (underbelly), the short loin (back section), the sirloin (hip), and the round (hindquarter)—yield individual cuts that are tender enough to be sold as steaks. The rib, short loin, and sirloin are the source of most premium steak house cuts, but tender and flavorful steaks also come from other parts of the steer; the chuck, in particular, is the source of a number of excellent, and inexpensive, steaks. Shown on the following pages are 16 of our favorite cuts. —*Molly Stevens, author of* All About Braising *(W. W. Norton, 2004)*

1 | ***Tri-Tip Sirloin Steak*** Tri-tip steaks come from a triangle-shaped muscle, known as the tri-tip, located in the bottom part of the sirloin section of the animal, which corresponds to the hip portion. These tender, full-flavored steaks—also known as newport steaks and triangle steaks—weigh three to eight ounces. **2** | ***Top Loin Steak*** The top loin (the designation "top" is a butchering term that identifies how the muscles sit in relation to one another) is part of the larger primal cut known as the short loin, which in turn is part of the full loin—the muscle group that runs alongside the backbone from the shoulder to the animal's hip. Boneless top loin steaks go by a potentially confusing array of names—including strip loin and new york strip—and can weigh anywhere from eight to 18 ounces. Bone-in top loin cuts are sometimes called shell steaks or club steaks. **3** | ***Boneless Shoulder Steak*** This large, oblong (and inexpensive) steak comes from the boneless portion of the chuck, or shoulder. These robustly flavored steaks stand up well to marinades; for best results slice thinly on the bias before serving. **4** | ***Top Sirloin Steak*** These big, boneless steaks come from the largest muscle of the sirloin, a continuation of the top loin. Relatively lean, top sirloins vary in tenderness and size, but all make an economical choice for a satisfying steak dinner. Top sirloin sometimes goes by the names sirloin butt and top sirloin butt.



5 | *Boneless Chuck Steak* These steaks come from underneath the steer's shoulder blade bone. These well-marbled, intensely flavorful steaks weigh between four and eight ounces and go by a number of names, including chuck filet, chuck eye, and bottom chuck. **6** | *Filet Mignon* Filet mignon steaks are made by cutting neat cross-sections from the thicker portion of the little-worked muscle known as the tenderloin, which is the tenderest muscle in the steer. The filet mignon gets its name from the French: *mignon* means dainty. Filets mignons range from four to 12 ounces each and have virtually no marbling. **7** | *Porterhouse* When the short loin of a steer is cut crosswise, the resulting steaks contain a portion of the top loin and the tenderloin separated by a T-shaped bone. The porterhouse comes from the thicker end of the short loin (the T-bone comes from closer to the rib and has a considerably smaller portion of the tenderloin). **8** | *Top Round Steak* The top round comes from the inside portion of the steer's hind leg. All round steaks are lean, and care should be taken not to overcook them.

9 | ***Pin-Bone Sirloin Steak*** The pin-bone steak is the most succulent of the sirloin steaks. Like the porterhouse, it consists of a piece of tenderloin and a meaty portion of top loin, but it also contains a telltale oval cross-section of the hip bone. Pin-bone steaks often include a tail, or flap, of tasty but fatty meat that protrudes above the steak and is usually trimmed off before sale. **10** | ***Sirloin Tip Steak*** This cut, also called the knuckle, comes from the part of the hindquarter of the steer closest to the tender sirloin, but it actually extends into the round, of which it is a part. Thus, sirloin tips are the tenderest of the round cuts; in fact, butchers often label them sirloin. Shaped like a half moon, this lean and quick-cooking cut weighs about eight ounces and delivers good, beefy flavor at a great price. **11** | ***Hanger Steak*** There is only one hanger steak per steer; part of the diaphragm, it "hangs" from the last rib when the animal is suspended during butchering. The meat of these steaks has deep, satisfying flavor, but, as with other coarse-grained cuts like flank and skirt, it can be chewy if cooked past medium rare. **12** | ***First-Cut Chuck Blade Steak*** This wide, well-marbled steak, usually weighing about eight ounces, consists of several different muscles from the rib end of the chuck. Only the first few steaks cut from this part of the chuck may be labeled first cut, and these are recognizable by a flat piece of blade bone. (See page 92 for more about this steak.)



13 | *Flank Steak* This flat, rectangular steak (also called a london broil) from the belly of the steer is distinguished by the coarse grain that runs lengthwise across it. Its big flavor and fibrous texture take well to grilling or broiling, as long as you don't cook it past medium rare and, when serving, remember to slice it thinly across the grain. **14** | *Skirt Steak* The loose grain and intensely beefy taste of skirt steak—the long diaphragm muscle of the steer—most often makes its appearance in the Tex-Mex favorite fajitas. **15** | *Top Blade Chuck Steak* This small, oblong cut from the chuck—also called a flatiron steak—is the second-tenderest in the entire steer after the tenderloin. A thin line of gristle runs down the center; increasingly, butchers remove it, making thin, rectangular steaks. Top blade steaks range from four to eight ounces each. **16** | *Rib Eye Steak* These well-marbled steaks, taken from the steer's rib section, offer the perfect balance between the tough, full-flavored chuck and the super-tender but milder-flavored loin. Rib eyes taken from the rib end closest to the chuck consist of a number of different muscles. Rib eyes taken from the end closest to the loin, like the one shown, do too, but include a bigger portion of the prized eye meat and are often pricier.

(continued from page 58) flavors evocative of the place where the cattle were raised. By trumpeting this diversity of taste and provenance, producers finally seem to be chipping away at our long-standing predilection for corn-fed meat.

La Cense, one of the nation's largest producers of grass-fed beef, raises its animals with an emphasis on steak. Kriegel says his top-selling cuts are top sirloin, New York strip, and rib eye, all of which are dry-aged before sale (see "Coming of Age", page 49). Kriegel has been surprised by the public's response. When an outsider can move to an old cattle town in the rural West and start selling grass-fed beef, he says, "it tells you something has changed, especially when local people are coming to our store to buy our beef and asking to visit our ranch".

"The cow is what the grass eats," La Cense's Griffith tells me as we tread over some of the bluebunch wheatgrass that is pushing up through the dun-colored earth on the company's property. He's talking about soil; the French would say he's talking about terroir. Indeed, the raising of cattle in a specific place, he tells me, can be as exact an art as the growing and ripening of grapes. La Cense cattle feed on tall grass—ten inches, usually—so they eat just the tops, which have the most nutrients. Once the tops are gone, the cattle are moved to a different pasture, while the grazed grasses grow back to their original height, which takes about 20 days, at which point the cattle may return. A single pasture can usually be grazed five to six times in a season.

During the winter, grazing is restricted to the valley lowland pastures, which support wheatgrasses and orchard grasses. For summer grazing, the cattle are relocated into the nearby Blacktail Mountains, where bluebunch wheatgrass and Idaho fescue thrive. As with most grass-finished cattle, the cows' diet translates into unique and subtle herbaceous flavors in the beef.

As La Cense cattle approach their second autumn—when they are roughly 18 months old—they are brought to slaughter at a nearby facility that caters to natural-beef producers and, unlike commodity-beef processors, houses the cattle in clean, spacious quarters. "You need a stress-free environment," says Kriegel. "Otherwise, the stress affects the steak's texture."

FOR MOST LOVERS of steak, in the end it is all about taste. And when it comes to the art and science of cooking one, whether it's a grass-fed filet mignon from a specialty purveyor or a top-blade chuck purchased at the local supermarket,

METHOD

Entrecôtes au Poivre Vert

(Strip Steaks with Green Peppercorn Sauce)

The recipe for this dish (facing page) is based on one in *Glorious French Food* by our friend James Peterson (Wiley, 2002). "Strictly speaking," writes Peterson, "an entrecôte is a boneless rib steak...but nowadays, in good places at least, [it's] a contre-filet (what in New York is called a strip steak)." Season four 1"-thick strip steaks (about 2 1/2 lbs. in all; see page 60) with salt to taste on a plate, cover, and refrigerate for 2 hours. Remove steaks from refrigerator and set aside at room temperature to let rest for 1 hour. Heat 1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Pat steaks dry; add 2 to skillet. Cook, flipping once, until well browned and medium rare, 4–5 minutes in all. Transfer steaks to a plate and tent with foil; set aside in a warm oven. Repeat with remaining steaks. Remove skillet from heat and add 2 finely chopped shallots; stir until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add 1 1/2 cups ruby port; bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Cook until mixture is reduced to about 1/4 cup, 5–6 minutes. Add 2 cups beef stock; boil until syrupy, 10–12 minutes. Remove skillet from heat; whisk in 1 cup heavy cream. Return skillet to medium heat; boil gently until thickened, 6–8 minutes. Stir in 1/4 cup rinsed and coarsely chopped brine-cured green peppercorns, 2 tsp. white wine vinegar, and salt to taste. Pour sauce over steaks. Serves 4.

MAKING THE GRADE

THE PASSION FOR PRIME STEAK is fueled by how little of it there is to go around. Less than 4 percent of all beef that passes through USDA gradings—which, unlike safety inspection, is voluntary and paid for by the meat processor—is labeled prime, and most of that lands on pricey steak house menus or in high-end butcher shops. Among the criteria for inclusion in this elite tier are fat marbling (the more, the better) and the animal's age (younger animals have less collagen in their muscle and, thus, tenderer meat).

The USDA instituted the grading system in 1926, with the aim of supplying the consumer with a reliable indication of quality. There are eight government grades for beef: prime, choice, select, standard, commercial, utility, canner, and cutter. Steak aficionados seek out the top two, prime and choice (the latter of which represents more than half of all graded beef), which are streaked with plenty of intramuscular fat—a condition that makes them tender enough for dry-heat cooking methods like grilling, roasting, and broiling. Steaks that have been graded select—a variety primarily sold in supermarkets—are generally too lean to yield better than average results. The remaining grades designate meat that's sold wholesale, for use in a range of products, from frozen foods to hot dogs, though the majority of this wholesale-class meat isn't graded at all. The reason is that most meatpackers don't bother to seek grading for cuts they know won't receive prime or choice designations, which fetch the highest prices. This ungraded meat is often called "no roll"; the term refers to the absence of the USDA grade stamp, which is rolled onto the carcass.

In addition to the federal grading system, consumers have another option available to them: beef that has undergone certification. This program, overseen by the USDA, certifies that the beef bearing this designation is from a particular breed or variety. The most common breed certification is for beef from Angus steer and heifers, which have consistently demonstrated a predisposition for developing well-marbled meat.

Steak lovers on a budget should remember that they'll get tastier results using lesser cuts (top round or flank steak, for example) graded prime or choice than they will with higher-end cuts (like rib eye or porterhouse) graded select. Note that most beef from naturally raised, grass-fed animals is sold ungraded, as its quality can't be judged by the same standards that apply to commercial beef. —*Dana Bowen*

ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI

There are as many opinions on the best way to cook a steak as there are men in spattered aprons clutching tongs on the Fourth of July