

THE BUSINESS TIMES

Weekend

21 - 22 OCTOBER 2017



ART
**THE WORK
 OF MICHAEL
 CRAIG-MARTIN**

DESIGN
**ANOUSKA
 HEMPEL'S
 SINGAPORE
 DEBUT**

HIGH STEAKS

The quest for the best beef in town.



HIGH STEAKS

In Singapore, the quest is on for the best beef in town.

👁️ JAIME EE & RACHEL LOI

IF THE LAST STEAK YOU ORDERED was a ribeye, sirloin or worse, just 'steak', it's time to realign your priorities if you want to maintain any credibility with the chi-chi beef-eating set. It's no longer about being able to differentiate between the marbling grades of Australian wagyu (0 to 9) or its Japanese counterpart (A1 to 5) either. These days, you need to know your txuleton from your tri-tip, Scottish Highland from Red Poll, shorthorn from longhorn, wet-aged from dry-aged, if you want to be included in the ranks of "informed" foodies.

So much for greenhouse gases or the joys of vegetarianism. Meat still reigns supreme among the food-obsessed, and to be able to taste the best beef in the world is their holy grail.

In Singapore, no doubt sparked by the arrival of Australian wagyu and then the real McCoy from Japan – especially after restrictions were lifted on their imports

– the last three to four years have seen a growing demand for 'designer' beef.

From not being able to give away grass-fed beef when the Michelin-starred steakhouse Cut opened in the Marina Bay Sands in 2010, executive chef Joshua Brown now spends much of his time sourcing different breeds of such cattle. "In 2013/2014, I started to bring in Red Poll, which is a smaller cattle," says chef Brown. "It's a heritage breed and grass fed. The following year I brought in a longhorn and then Highland beef. I was testing the waters to see if guests would be receptive to it and they were very much so."

It's a far cry from the early days of the restaurant, when diners shunned grass-fed meat because it was chewy and less rich in flavour than grain-fed meat. But now, even though the client profile hasn't changed much, diners are a lot more adventurous, says chef Brown.

Tan Ken Loon, owner of Naked Finn



and Nekkid, started out focusing on seafood but has recently branched out into artisanal beef. While he enjoys scouring Hokkaido for esoteric brands of wagyu, he is currently obsessed with Scottish Highland beef, which is raised in Australia.

“Highland cows are the only breed that has not been genetically modified,” says Mr Tan. “Historically, they were not commercially viable. Back in the 19th century there was a lot of cross breeding as the industry tried to produce more yield and faster growing animals. The Highlands were left alone because of their small size, horns and long shaggy fur. So they have been ignored over the centuries.”

At least until carnivorous author Mark Schatzker proclaimed Highland beef the best in the world in his book *Steak: One Man's Search for the World's Tastiest Piece of Beef*. While Schatzker gave an A-plus rating to the meat in Scotland, Mr Tan gets his from a farm in Melbourne, owned by a Scottish cattle vet who found the surroundings there very similar to the Highland's native living environment. He regularly buys a whole cow, yielding around 130kg of meat after it's been processed, which lasts for about three months at his restaurant.

DRY-AGED BEEF

Hunks of beef hang like fossilised exhibits in temperature controlled glass cases at high-end meat purveyor Huber's Butchery in Dempsey, which dry ages beef for both restaurants and well-heeled customers. If they buy the meat from Huber's, it costs an extra \$20 to be aged for 30 days, and up to \$40 for 90 days, if they dare.

“It's definitely a trend because we get a lot of people asking for it,” says Huber's resident butcher Patrick Heuberger. “You intensify the flavour when you dry age. You get a more gamey, strong flavour of beef which has a certain taste not everybody will like. Up to 30 days, the taste is ok, not too strong. But after 45, 60



(1) Wolfgang's Steakhouse - Wolfgang Zwiener. (2) Wakanui's Ocean Beef Ribeye. (3) Wolfgang's Steakhouse - PrimeRib. (4) Wolfgang's Steakhouse interiors.

2

“I BROUGHT IN A LONGHORN AND THEN HIGHLAND BEEF. I WAS TESTING THE WATERS TO SEE IF GUESTS WOULD BE RECEPTIVE TO IT AND THEY WERE VERY MUCH SO.”

~

JOSHUA BROWN



3



4

or 90 days of ageing, the flavour becomes whoa – I personally don't like it.”

Long dry-aged beef has very little moisture so it needs to be cooked really quickly, adds Mr Heuberger. He's had to deal with complaints about inedible dry steak “so we need to educate people – it's not the same as a regular steak”.

Even restaurants are getting into the action. Cut's chef Brown does some limited ageing in his kitchen but Bar-Roque's Stephane Istel has gone as far as installing a customised dry-aging fridge that can hold at least 150kg of beef.

He's so serious about it that chef Istel went to France last August just to learn the finer points of aging from veteran butchers there. “Dry-aging is popular in America and I worked for Daniel Boulud in New York (he headed DB Bistro in MBS before starting Bar-Roque four years ago) so I had an interest in it then.”

In Singapore, “demand is increasing”, says the chef. “We also do a bit of dry-aged wagyu but people are mostly interested in healthy grass-fed beef. It's lean so the dry-aging process makes it more tender.”



1

NEW ENTRANTS

In New York City, Peter Luger has been the go-to steakhouse for its signature dry-aged steaks. But it was located in Brooklyn, which meant Manhattanites couldn't go as often as they might like. Enter Wolfgang's Steakhouse, named after Wolfgang Zweiner, who worked at Peter Luger for 40 years before starting his own chain of steakhouses with his ex-banker son Peter, who was in town recently to open the chain's first outpost in Singapore at the new Intercontinental in Robertson Quay.

While Peter Luger dominated the dry ageing scene from the 1980s, "We brought the whole dry-aging scene into Manhattan," says the younger Mr Zweiner, who runs 18 restaurants in the US, Beijing, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Seoul. The first Wolfgang's Steakhouse opened in 2004 and since then, they've made it a point to dry-age their meat in their own premises, using only USDA prime black Angus beef. "Our specifications are typically bulls, Angus and black Angus, 22 to 24 months, prime, grain or corn fed."

The idea to specialise only in dry-aged beef came from the original Peter Luger, and now that is what differentiates Wolfgang from everyone else, says Mr Zweiner. "A lot of restaurants say they do dry-aging but they don't actually know the process. They just buy it and say it's dry-aging."

Wolfgang only does Angus beef because "most people we talk to don't even eat wagyu anymore because it's too fatty and too little. It's like bacon. People like our beef because it's consistent and you can eat

a lot of it."

While Wolfgang's Angus are American, the Japanese steakhouse brand Wakanui has been wooing its countrymen with Angus bred in New Zealand, says Makoto Kinjo, president of Anzco Foods Japan. It's a joint venture with Anzco, one of New Zealand's largest meat exporters. The restaurant had a short-lived stint in Singapore with a different partner a few years ago but is now set to make a fresh start early next month in the new Marina One complex.

That it's able to get Japanese diners to forgo wagyu for this pasture-raised beef attests to its quality, says Mr Kinjo. Called Ocean beef, it's another name for beef fans to add to their vocabulary. The black Angus cows are raised on the coastline of New Zealand's South Island, eating grass before being moved to feedlots where they eat feed mixed with wheat and barley. "The objective is to achieve a perfect balance of lean and marbling that gives it tenderness and sweetness."

He claims that in Japan, wagyu is on the decline "because they've had it for so long and they find it too rich and unhealthy. There's a growing popularity of leaner Ocean and grass-fed beef."

The Singapore market in turn "is made up of many different people with different expectations and understanding of beef. Local Singaporeans go for wagyu because it's trendy. But it will pass. Somebody will bring European beef, and dry-aging. It's good for grass-fed beef but not so much for wagyu. Singapore is somewhere in between."



2

"MOST PEOPLE WE TALK TO DON'T EVEN EAT WAGYU ANYMORE BECAUSE IT'S TOO FATTY AND TOO LITTLE. IT'S LIKE BACON. PEOPLE LIKE OUR BEEF BECAUSE IT'S CONSISTENT AND YOU CAN EAT A LOT OF IT."

~

WOLFGANG ZWEINER