

Prime time

Delicious, tender dry-aged beef becoming all the rage

By Kerry J. Byrne | Wednesday, February 24, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Food & Recipes

Dry-aged beef has long been a staple of high-end steakhouses. Aging beef for several weeks in cold temperatures allows enzymes and bacteria to break down the meat's tough tissues and makes for especially delicious steaks.

For centuries, dry-aging was a common way for butchers to preserve and tenderize beef. Now, it's shaping up to be the latest hot trend among chefs.

"Everybody's doing charcuterie these days," said Four Seasons Hotel Boston executive chef Brooke Vosika. "But dry-aging will be the next big thing ... The meat's more tender, you're concentrating flavor. There's nothing like it. And it's fun to do."

Vosika is almost giddy discussing the new dry-aged beef program at the posh hostelry.

There's a \$17,000 broiler that sears steaks to perfection in 3 minutes at 1,600 degrees, and a walk-in cooler devoted to aging slabs of prime rib, New York strip, T-bone and porterhouse.

Vosika is one of just two people with a key to the cooler. In it, slabs of beef from small farms, such as Wolfe's Neck in Freeport, Maine, age in a carefully controlled environment of chilly temperature and low humidity under a sterile black light that kills harmful bacteria.

The room is just above freezing but has a warm, heavy aroma - similar to what you'd find in a bakery or brewery, places where hungry yeasts emit aromatic esters.

In this case, the aroma comes from the beneficial bacteria that break down the meat's connective tissue and form a protective crust on its outside (similar to the process that encases stinky cheeses inside a powdery bacteria must). It results in an extraordinarily tender but flavorful steak.

"It's the ultimate comfort food and I think we're going back to that," said Vosika. "It's a hand-crafted artisanal style of meat that used to be very common."

Beef can lose up to 20 percent of its weight during aging, which is one reason why dry-aged beef is so expensive. The porterhouse at the Four Seasons' Bristol Lounge sells for a cool \$46. Whole Foods, the rare retail market with its own dry-aging program, sells its cuts for an average of about \$20 per pound.

Recipe: THE FOUR SEASONS EGGLESS BEARNAISE SAUCE

- 4 medium yellow tomatoes, diced
- 2 T. sugar
- 5 shallots, chopped
- 5 sprigs tarragon, chopped
- 2 c. white wine
- 10 peppercorns
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 lb. soft butter
- Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Toss tomatoes with sugar. Roast until tender, about 15 to 20 minutes, trying not to add too much color. Sweat shallots and three-quarters of tarragon in a saucepan with wine, peppercorns and bay leaf and reduce to 4 tablespoons in volume. Strain reduction into a blender with roasted tomatoes and blend until smooth. Pour mixture into double-



Photo by Nancy Lane

boiler pot over warm water and whisk in butter until incorporated. Strain through fine sieve, add remaining tarragon and season with salt and pepper to taste. Hold at room temperature. Makes enough sauce for about 8 steaks.

Recipe: BRISTOL LOUNGE STEAK BUTTER*Dry ingredients:*

1 lb. soft butter, salted
3 anchovies
1 oz. dried parsley
2 T. dried thyme
2 T. dried oregano
2 T. dried sage
1 T. dried rosemary
1 T. curry powder
1/2 t. cayenne pepper

Place all spices in a mixing bowl with the softened butter.

Fresh ingredients:

1/4 c. shallots chopped fine
3 cloves garlic, chopped fine
4 juniper berries, crushed with mortar and pestle
1 t. capers
3 T. tarragon, chopped well

Make sure all are finely chopped, then fold into dry ingredients and butter.

Wet ingredients:

1 oz. red wine vinegar
2 oz. Dijon mustard
1 T. Worcestershire sauce
2 T. brandy
1 t. Tabasco sauce

When dry and fresh ingredients are combined thoroughly, add wet ingredients and mix well. Roll into a log shape and refrigerate for up to 6 months. Makes about 24 ounces (1-ounce servings) of butter.

Steak tips

Dry-aged meat is expensive, but a great home steak does not have to be. The Web is full of ways to dry-age meat at home, including tips for trying it in your refrigerator. But the pros advise against it.

Instead, Brooke Vosika of the Four Seasons and Jason Pearsall, who runs the aged beef program at Whole Foods, suggest home cooks stick to the tried-and-true methods of perfect steak.

- Buy well-marbled meat, because fat has more flavor.
- Keep it simple: a little salt and pepper is all most chefs ever use on steak.
- Season the meat right before cooking, so the salt doesn't draw out precious juices.
- Cook the meat as hot as possible: broil it or grill it outdoors over hot wood, not propane. The meat, no matter the cut, needs to sear quickly to seal in flavor.

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