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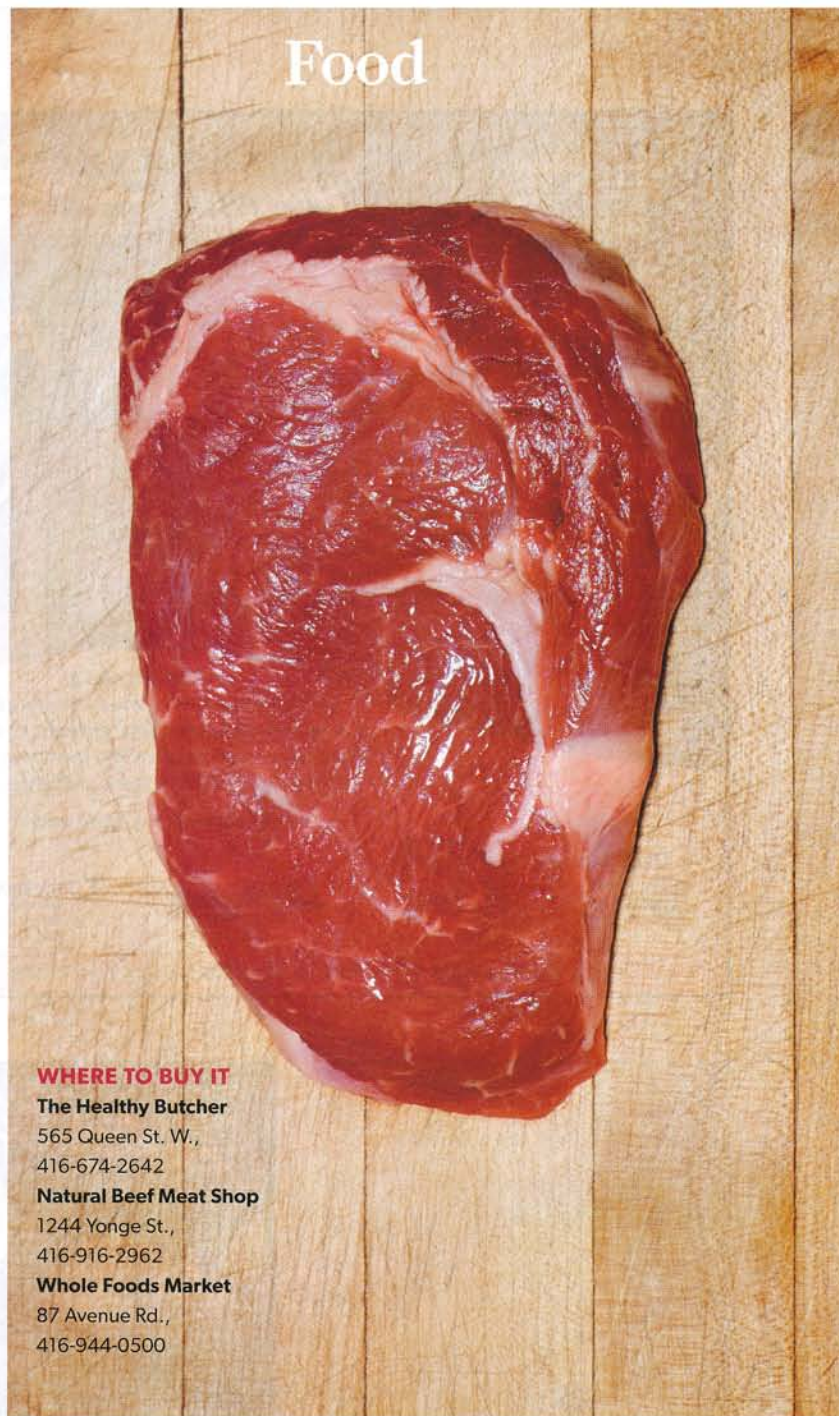
High Steaks

Before industrial feedlots came along, we used to raise cattle on good old-fashioned grass. Those old-timers were on to something

BY SASHA CHAPMAN

THE BEST STEAK I'VE EVER EATEN came from Argentina, where cattle graze on the lush pampas of the central plains. Hot off the grill at The Fifth, that grass-fed filet tasted like an entirely different animal: it was cleaner and sweeter than Canadian grain-fed beef, and it had a bold, gamy complexity that easily held its own against a green pool of chimichurri. The steak was lean, but still juicy and butter-knife tender. Savouring the first bite of that exquisitely charred meat, I instantly understood why the average Argentine eats four times more beef than we do—some 140 pounds per year.

Political and economic roadblocks have made Argentine beef exceedingly hard to find in Canada, but a handful of prescient ranchers are working to match its quality, and to satisfy a growing demand for beef that's raised the old-fashioned way. So far, only a few restaurants, such as Susur, ever feature grass-fed, and although Jamie Kennedy once raised a couple of steers on pasture—and raves about the results—he doesn't have any immediate plans to repeat the experiment on a large scale. Home cooks—not restaurateurs—are the ones leading this charge. At Toronto's Whole Foods Market, sales of pastured beef have increased 600 per cent, to more than 150 kilos a week, since the grocer first stocked it last year; and a new supplier, called Natural Beef Meat Shop, opened its doors in Summerhill in late May. The shop's tender strip loins,



WHERE TO BUY IT

The Healthy Butcher

565 Queen St. W.,
416-674-2642

Natural Beef Meat Shop

1244 Yonge St.,
416-916-2962

Whole Foods Market

87 Avenue Rd.,
416-944-0500

from cattle pastured in Uruguay, are wonderfully marbled and clean-tasting, though with a little cheating: while the beef is sold as grass-fed, the cattle get supplementary grain in their last 90 days.

I wanted to like our local grass-fed, and not just because that Argentine tenderloin was so memorable. Most cattle in North America live their last months on an industrial feedlot, where they're fattened on a diet of corn (it constitutes about 75 per cent of their feed), which ruminants were never meant to digest—not to mention liquefied fat, beef tallow, protein supplements and antibiotics so they can keep it all down. Industrial beef also exacts an environmental toll. It takes criminal quantities of petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides—one estimate puts it at 35 gallons of oil—to raise a single steer on feedlot grain. And grain feeding, as opposed to grass, reduces the levels of omega-3s and cancer-fighting conjugated linoleic acid in beef, while vastly increasing its fat content.

Late this spring, I dropped in on the Healthy Butcher, where husband and wife proprietors Mario Fiorucci and Tara Longo stock organic grass-fed beef from Fieldgate Organics in summer and early fall. In season, grass-fed accounts for a quarter of their beef sales. Fiorucci wrapped up two New York strip loins for me, one grain-fed, one pastured, with the proviso that the pastured steak had been finished on hay (it was too early in the season for grass-finished beef). The visual difference was striking—not unlike the difference between fatty farmed Atlantic salmon and its leaner wild Pacific cousin. The grain-fed cut was marbled, firm and light pink; the grass-fed had a darker, blood red colour and hardly any fat. And while the grain-fed tasted like any good quality steak—beefy and tender, with enough marbling to allow the flavours to linger on the tongue—the grass-fed was as lean and savoury as venison. But it lacked the sweetness of my Argentine tenderloin, and it was a little tough. Whole Foods' grass-fed New York strip loin, raised in King City by Mike and Cynthia Beretta, was even more chewy.

After nearly a century of grain feeding, Canadian grass-fed cattle producers have some relearning to do. With the right breeding and forage mix—something ranchers have begun to experiment with—it should be possible to raise tender, juicy grass-fed in North America.

And, of course, flavour isn't just about compound molecules hitting your palate. Knowing where your meat comes from can leave a much better taste in your mouth. **END**