TORONTO STAR

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Food

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FARE LADY
Looking for butchers who are a cut above.
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Got a beef with your butcher?

Susan Sampson
Fare Lady

You ask for, say, a skirt steak, and get a blank look. You look through sterile, plastic packages for a substitute, but the meat is carved so badly you don't care anymore. You yearn for information but receive the unkindest cut of all — having the butcher shrug at you after a long session of hunting and gathering for dinner.

Blame it on the lost art of butchery.

I am in a group of 10, gathered where few meat eaters ever congregate, in the chilly back room of an organic butcher shop, next to the meat locker. We are here to watch and learn as the back end of a beef cow (hip sirloin, loin and flank) is carved into familiar and unfamiliar pieces of meat.

"This is kind of rare — the actual butchering of animals," Mario Fiorucci tells us. Fiorucci is co-president of The Healthy Butcher on Queen St. W.

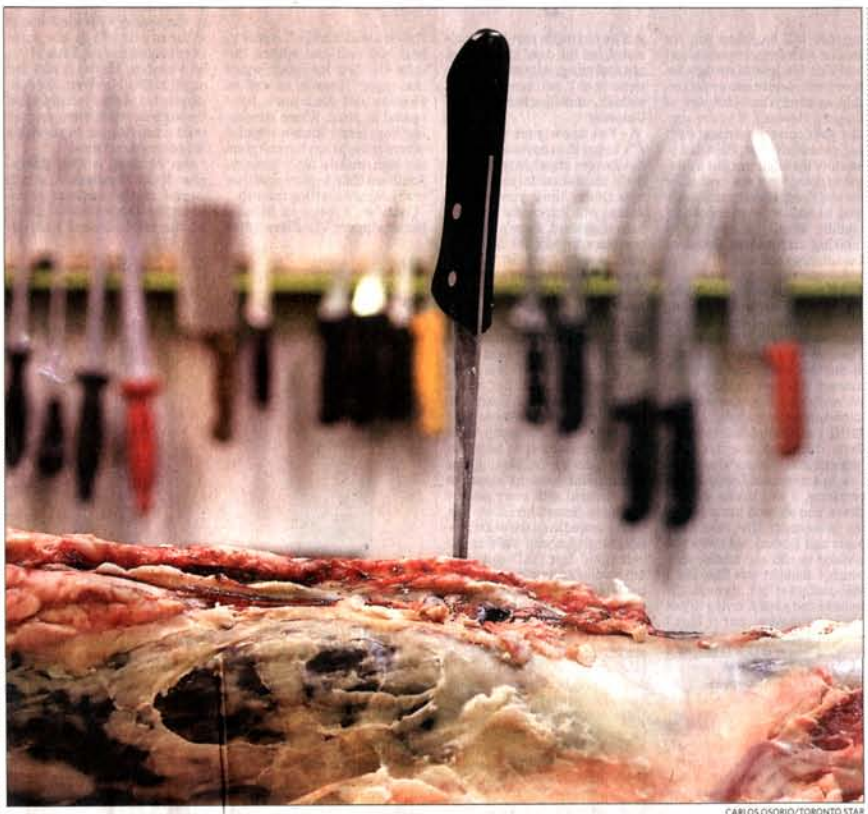
Surprisingly, the interest is not rare. Thirty more people had tried to register. Our group is made up mainly of curiosity seekers rather than professionals. "I'm going to be a better consumer after this," says one. "I like to cook," says another. A physician talks about getting a different kind of "anatomy lesson." And there's a bit of nostalgia involved for the man whose family ran a small farm in Argentina. One student is writing a book on "carnivore chic."

Head butcher Ryan Donovan approaches a hip of beef dangling from a ceiling hook — "on the rail," as they call it. Gravity will assist. With a curved knife called a scimitar in one hand and a hook in the other, he makes the first cuts. Donovan holds the knife in a stabbing grip because, he says, that's the best way not to cut himself. Only a few drops of blood from the carcass fall near a drain in the clean but slippery floor.

The meat has its own topography. Muscles are separated by layers of fat. Donovan cuts along the delineations. "Butchery is just a matter of disassembling," he points out.

Assistant Geordie Glumac tag-teams. A big cut is passed to him. He uses his hands to rip and pull fat and papery membranes away from the muscle. Donovan approves of the tearing, crunching sounds. "To me, that's a sign that things are going well," he says.

Encountering big bones, Glumac moves on to the band saw. Sharp, fast and cruel, it is a disaster waiting to happen. Still, Glumac cuts a shank into osso bucos and later strips off the backbone without any bloodletting. A plastic scraper is used to remove the sticky bone dust.



CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

In a class held at The Healthy Butcher, aged beef is ready to be carved into retail cuts. The butchers are very particular about their knives.

These Healthy Butchers started out as chefs. Donovan admits he never tackled or even saw a whole animal during his time in the restaurant rat race or as a student at Stratford Chefs School. He says there's no such thing as butcher's "papers" nowadays. Butchers learn on the job — except they're not learning as much as they used to.

Since the 1960s, most meat processing has been done in central plants. Supermarkets and shops receive boxes filled with pre-cut meat — the popular cuts. Their "butchers" subdivide but are otherwise left out of the loop. Ignorance, apathy and bad habits are professional hazards.

Donovan prefers to hire chefs as butcher trainees so he doesn't have to unteach them. He says it's entirely possible to interview a butcher who has done nothing but open boxes for 15 years.

An assembly-line approach opens the door to mistakes and sloppiness. Glumac notes that one Ontario producer, for example, slaughters 1,700 head a day — fast. Back in the days before central processing and mass agriculture, butchers actually butchered.

Whole animals — weighing 1,000-plus pounds — are split lengthwise into two sides of beef. Each side is divided into "primal cuts." There are nine: chuck, shank, brisket, rib, plate, loin, sirloin, flank and hip. Shoppers see only "retail cuts," which are individual muscles or groups of muscles cut from the primals. And shoppers rarely see all of them.

Different cutting methods yield different cuts. One way, you get a full tenderloin and striploin steaks. Another way, and you have T-bone and porterhouse steaks. Donovan avoids slicing through the tri-tip roast. This elusive cut is named for its triangular shape and its location at the tip of the sirloin. He is also one of the few local butchers to extract the vacio. That is its Argentine name. The French would call it the bavette, the British the thin flank.

Canadians encounter four different naming systems for cuts of beef: Canadian, British, American and French. That can cause confusion in the shops. If you clip a recipe from an American cookbook that calls for, say, a delmonico steak, the man behind the meat counter at the supermarket may scratch his head. He may relate better to it as a bone-in striploin or a wing steak.

When working with primal cuts, the challenge is to use all the animal. As Glumac cuts and carves, he tosses bits and pieces of red meat into a bin under the table. It is destined to become ground beef. The butchers will eyeball the fat content and sort it into categories, like lean or extra-lean. Into an adjacent bin go the huge bones and cartilage, hunks of crumbly fat, gristle and glands — all scrap.

The butchers estimate that it costs $1.50 a pound for a conventionally raised beef cow and about $4 a pound for an organically raised one. The losses add up. So do the upgrades.

Dry aging for three weeks can lead to a 15 per cent weight loss. The simplest way to describe dry aging, Fiorucci says, is this: "The meat is decomposing over time." But there's a difference between aging and rotting. In dry aging, bacteria denature proteins, making the beef more tender.

Other factors affect tenderness. Lesser-used muscles are more tender, hard-working ones tougher. The tenderloin up near the spine, for example, hardly requires a knife after it's cooked. The downside is that it's not as flavourful as, say, a brisket. Lack of marbling, or veins of fat, also plays a part in the flavour equation. That's why filet mignon, cut from the tenderloin, is usually wrapped with bacon.

And surprise: the Canadian grading system (prime, AAA, AA and A) refers to fat content, Fiorucci says, and is not an indication of the meat's quality.

He believes the toughest cuts can be the tastiest, though they require long applications of "wet heat," like braising and stewing. For tender cuts, cooks can get away with dry heat, like grilling and roasting.

Donovan notes that flavour and texture depend on what the animals eat. In an organic butcher shop, he deals in animals raised humanely by a limited selection of farmers they know and visit. And he has found the flavours are distinctive, even farm by farm.

"I never thought so much that you are what you eat until I started butchering," Donovan says.

As the three-hour course concludes, I leave knowing what to look for in a butcher's shop and what questions to ask about the meat. There is a small cadre of butcher shops in Toronto that care about their craft, and they deserve support. You don't have to be an unhappy customer.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Here's a recipe to whet your appetite for beef.

Beef Sashimi

✓ Star Tested

Inspired by a dish in *Nobu Now* (2005, $65) by chef Nobu Matsuhisa, who runs a Japanese fusion restaurant empire worldwide. Ask the butcher in advance for thinly sliced beef, carpaccio-style. Ponzu is a citrusy soy sauce, sold in many supermarkets. Fleur de sel is flaky coarse sea salt, sold in gourmet food shops.

1/4 lb (120 g) beef tenderloin, sliced paper-thin
1 tsp sesame seeds
1 tsp + 1 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
2 large cloves garlic (1 thinly sliced, 1 finely grated)
1 tsp Asian sesame oil
2 tbsp ponzu sauce
1 tsp ginger cut in very thin strips
1 tbsp chopped chives
Fleur de sel to taste

PREPARATION: Arrange beef on 2 plates.

Toast sesame seeds in small dry skillet until crackling and fragrant, about 1 to 2 minutes. Scrape into small bowl.

Wipe same small skillet. Add 1 teaspoon olive oil. Heat on medium-high until shimmery. Add sliced garlic. Stir-fry until golden and crisp, about 1 minute. Pour through fine strainer to drain, reserving oil in small bowl. Set aside sliced garlic. To reserved oil, stir in remaining 1 tablespoon olive oil, sesame oil and grated garlic.

Drizzle oil mixture over beef. Drizzle ponzu over top. Sprinkle ginger over top. Let sit 15 minutes. Just before serving, sprinkle with fleur de sel, sesame seeds, reserved sliced garlic and chives.

Makes 2 servings.

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