



FERNANDO MORALES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The local butcher is dying out. But an updated gourmet breed is saving the species from extinction, **D. GRANT BLACK** writes

The new chop shop

Remember when Alice the housekeeper on TV's *The Brady Bunch* used to date Sam the butcher? Alice knew the best way to bring home the choicest cuts was to get cozy with the man who made them. The same holds true today, but a lot else has changed since the 1970s.

In most large Canadian centres, competition and succession issues have culled many independent butchers from the retail herd. But a new breed is taking on the inexpensive offerings at Costco, Safeway and other superstores. Specializing in catering, prepared foods and high-quality specialty products such as gourmet sausages, naturally smoked bacon and exotic meats (elk, bison, ostrich), they're not your local chop shops. These monuments to meat are gourmet boutiques.

Until a few years ago, Saskatoon was overrun with seven independent butcher shops for a population of only 250,000. Now, there are two. Boryski's Butcher Block in the city's north end has been in business for 24 years. It has weathered the storm by adjusting to changing demands.

"We're not a butcher shop any more, at least not like the butcher shop of 20 years ago," owner Victor Boryski says. "We've had to diversify to include catering and baked goods such as cookies, breads and pies."

Like most gourmet butchers, he prides himself on his exclusive inventory. In this case, the biggest draw is succulent Angus beef, aged

21 days. It's the meat version of a fine wine or a superb single-malt whisky.

"Our customers want specialty items," Boryski says. "And they'll pay the price. Yet our prices are comparable to the grocery stores."

In Vancouver, Tango's Gourmet Meats is making a name with marinades and specialty cuts.

"We have an average of 12 marinades on the counter at once," says 29-year-old owner Brandon Adams, who has worked in the meat industry for 10 years, both in butchering and the sales and marketing side. Popular choices include burgundy wine pepper steaks, sweet bourbon New York strips and sun-dried tomato chicken.

Opened in late 2002, Tango's features non-medicated, open-range beef and free-range chickens. "We're not your traditional butcher shop that brings in sides of beef and has every kind of cut of meat available," says Adams, whose place in the West End also has a deli side with a variety of specialty cheese products and meats.

"We buy block cuts instead of sides of beef, butcher in-store and specialize in the cuts that we're offering." That goes for less expensive cuts and high-end picks such as Alberta Prime beef and Angus aged for 35 days.

But it's not just the promise of great taste driving consumers to upscale butchers: Food safety is also a factor. Especially after the mad-cow-disease scare, people want to know what the animals they eat are chowing down on.

Making the grade

Tango's Gourmet Meats

865 Denman St., Vancouver, 604-681-2121.

Boryski's Butcher Block

7-2210 Millar Ave., Saskatoon, 306-934-5020 (www.boryski.com).

The Healthy Butcher

565 Queen St. W., Toronto, 416-674-2642 (www.thehealthybutcher.com).

Ted Farron's Gourmet Butcher Shop

3838 McGregor Blvd., Windsor, Ont., 519-966-1660 (www.farronsbutchershop.com).

S.O.S. Boucher

138 Atwater St., Stand #17 in the Atwater Market, Montreal, 514-933-0297.

The British Butcher

1595 Bedford Highway, Bedford, N.S., 902-832-0223 (www.british-butcher.ca).

"We were borderline vegetarians at one point, simply because you read those bestselling books and you get disgusted by how the meat is grown," says Mario Fiorucci, a former corporate lawyer who opened the Healthy Butcher in Toronto with his wife, Tara Longo, in March. "Even the places that sold the so-called 'naturally raised' meats couldn't actually tell us where they originated."

At their shop in the trendy Queen Street West neighbourhood, the pedigree of every cut of their 100 per cent certified organic meat can be traced. Sides of beef, pork and lamb are sourced from Ontario or-

At gourmet meat shops such as the Healthy Butcher in Toronto, the focus is on quality, not quantity: less choice, but more flavour.

ganic producers, then carved by in-house butcher Sebastian Cortez. Whole chickens, turkeys and ducks are brought in fresh: Nothing is frozen before it's put on display. They also sell organic dry goods (breads, pastas), cheeses and prepared dishes.

The couple opened the shop after two years of research; neither has any family butcher shop history (Longo used to be an investment banker). And although wearing aprons is new to them, Fiorucci actually considers the Healthy Butcher a return to chop shops of the past. "We're essentially doing what the butcher shops used to do many years ago, such as bringing in whole sides of meat directly from the farms."

Things started to change with the advent of the big box grocery store, he says. "You'd go to the meat department and everything was already prepackaged, vacuum-sealed and labelled. There's no butcher to speak to because it's already been cut."

Despite higher prices (organic chickens sell for \$4.99 a pound; dry-aged beef up to \$26 a pound) business is booming; go near closing and many cuts are sold out. Still, fare for smaller wallets is available. "The grocery stores don't age their beef and we do," Fiorucci says. "We can take a tougher cut like boneless blade steak and dry-age it a bit longer, then sell it for \$6.99 a pound. Certified organic. A steak that would match up in price to a New York strip loin of questionable quality at the grocery store." (For those keeping track, they dry-age their top beef cuts on site for 25 days.)

The Healthy Butcher and Tango's Gourmet Meats both have expansion plans in the next few years — evidence that the independent butcher isn't extinct yet. (Alas, Boryski's son is heading to university instead of taking over the family business.)

All three shop owners agree that, along with the choice cuts, it's the personal service that brings in regulars. "Our customers love the service and the atmosphere," Boryski says. "We interact a lot and we know all about their family and their social life, where they've travelled to recently."

They're also able to answer questions about cooking times and suggest a delectable recipe. "And if they want a steak that's a little bit thicker, no problem. A little thinner, no problem," Fiorucci says.

"I think the trend is picking up," Adams says. "People are starting to move away from grocery-chain shopping where it's prepackaged. They really enjoy coming in and picking out the goods they want or buying one of these, two of those. They can buy quality things at their own convenience."

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