

ARRIVADERCI PASTA

Leave it to the Italians to cook a porterhouse good enough to make a grown man cry

BY MARK SCHATZKER PHOTOGRAPH BY CRAIG CUTLER

WHEN YOU THINK OF GREAT STEAK, you don't think of Italy. You think of Texas or Alberta or Argentina — some stretch of frontier where the cowboys have leathery faces and the pasture stretches off into the horizon. But there I was in Florence, on my honeymoon, taking bad photos of Michelangelo's *David*. Only a tourist, you would think, would order steak in the land of pasta and risotto.

That night at dinner, I ordered a steak. It was the waiter's fault. He told me it was a specialty of the region. "I'll have one of those," I said.

Fifteen minutes later, the steak arrived. It was at least two inches thick, maybe more, and swimming in olive oil. No marinade. No steak rub. No HP Sauce.

I cut a chunk off, placed it in my mouth, and suddenly possessed clear and perfect knowledge: This was the best steak I had ever tasted. I began swearing, first to myself, then to my wife. I pounded my fist on the table and started babbling the way Howard Carter babbled when he discovered Tut's tomb. The steak was un-goddamn-believable: dripping with succulence, tender as an overripe tomato. But it was the flavour that truly floored me. It tasted beefy. It made all previous great steaks I had eaten seem as though they were merely hinting at this level of steak glory. It was called bistecca alla Fiorentina.

BACK IN CANADA, life returned to normal, or at least as normal as life can seem after such good piece of meat. I worked, we bought a house, and at night I researched my magical bistecca. I found many recipes, and they were all the same: Take a massively thick porterhouse or T-bone steak, grill it over a hot flame — preferably over olive wood or oak, but charcoal will do — season it with salt and pepper, drizzle it in good olive oil (optional), and serve. Could it really be that simple?

The answer is no. I did everything the recipes asked and the resulting steak tasted okay, but it certainly wasn't the kind of steak that

makes you curse or bang your fist on the table.

Why? As far as I could tell, there was only one thing different about the Italian Fiorentina, and that was the beef. Italians — Tuscans especially — make a big deal over a particular kind of beef called Chianina (pronounced *ki-nina*), which comes from an enormous, ancient breed of cattle that has been raised round those parts for more than twenty-two centuries. Was Chianina really any different, any better, than Canadian beef? There was no way of knowing without going back to Italy.

So I went back to Italy.



The secret to Tuscany's bistecca alla Fiorentina is the ample and organic Chianina breed, pictured above.

I HEADED TO THE TOWN of Guasticce, to learn from a master grillman named David Gastaldin, who runs a restaurant called Osteria del Contadino. He started by taking me to his walk-in fridge, where, hanging from a hook, was a dark and fleshy loin of Chianina beef. The beef, he said, has to hang for three to four weeks — we call this dry ageing — to become tender and develops the right taste. Then he impressed upon me the importance of the Chianina diet, which consists of a mixture of barley, corn, and soy along with plenty of hay. North American cattle, by contrast, are injected with hormone pellets and eat almost nothing but corn, a diet that makes our beef tender, cheap, and tasteless. As David put it, "For me, when the cow eats good, the cow tastes good."

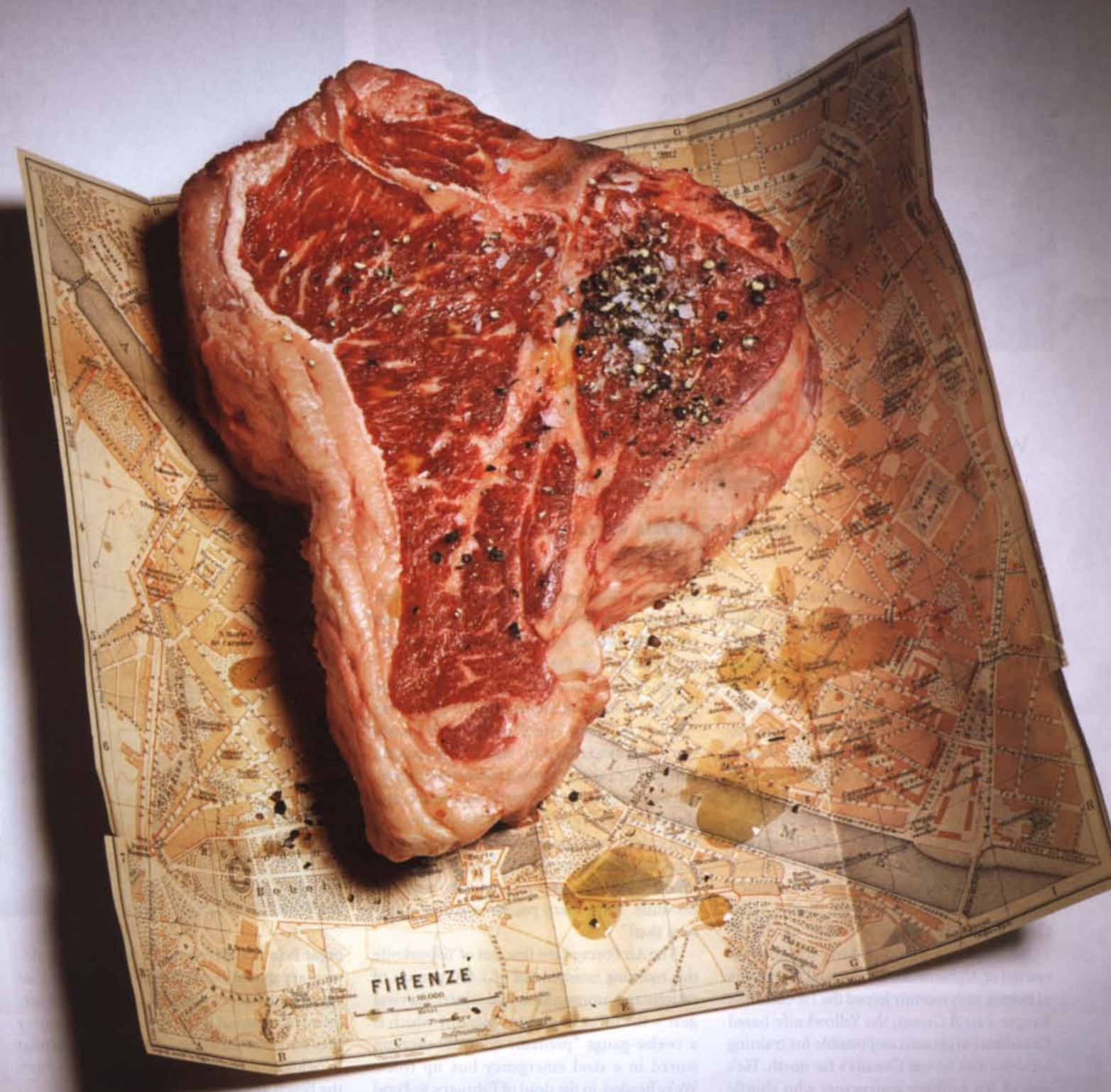
It was time for the grill. Using a gigantic cleaver, David hacked off a two-inch steak from the loin and laid it over the fire. He threw

a handful of salt and pepper on the raw side, cautioning me not to season the meat until it hits the grill, because all the juice will be drawn out and lost. About ten minutes later he flipped it, dousing the cooked side with salt as juices dripped into the coals and sent up puffs of smoke.

After another ten minutes, the meat was done. David cut the meat off the bone, explaining that with aged beef, the bone can take on a peculiar aroma. He placed the meat — red in the middle — on two plates and presented it to us. "Aren't you going to pour olive oil over it?" I asked. He looked at me funny. Later, at the table, when David wasn't looking, I poured some extra-virgin olive oil over the steak. It was good. But it was also good without it. There was more fist pounding, more cursing. The difference, clearly, was the Chianina.

THE BIG QUESTION IS, Can you buy Chianina beef in Canada? No. But don't lose hope. While we may not have Chianina cows, we have plenty of our own fine beef breeds, such as Angus and Hereford. The real trick is finding steak that's been raised to taste good. Garden-variety steaks from the supermarket or butcher, the product of antibiotics, hormones and an all-grain diet, are tender but have little flavour, so little that they don't taste like much without a rub or marinade. The grass-fed and naturally raised grain-fed steaks, on the other hand, tasted rich, deep, and satisfying. Like the Chianina, these need only some salt, a little pepper, and some time on the grill.

If you want to make your own bistecca alla Fiorentina, find a butcher who cares about where his beef comes from. Ask him: 1) Do you have organic or naturally raised beef? and 2) Is it dry aged? Get him to cut a steak off the loin — either a T-bone or porterhouse — that's at least two inches thick, then take it home and lay it over a hot grill; but warn your wife or girlfriend, because as soon as you taste it, you're probably going to swear. ■



WHERE'S THE
(REALLY
GOOD) BEEF?

Whole Foods Market
WEST VANCOUVER
604-678-0500

The Butcher Shoppe
CALGARY
403-948-9572

The Healthy Butcher
TORONTO
TheHealthyButcher.com,
416-674-2642

Boucherie Charcuterie Chez Vito
MONTREAL
514-277-1981