



101 IN PROFESSIONAL CHEF CIRCLES THE ULTIMATE SIZZLE AND SEASONING OF A STEAK HAS DEEPENED INTO TRUE RELIGION. SO WHAT ARE THE GOLDEN RULES? CANVASSING HER FELLOW BEEF BRETHREN AS TO THEIR PERSONAL CREDOs, KATY KEIFFER LISTENS TO GOSPELS IN A NUMBER OF KEYS.

Cooking a steak? "It's all about the fire and the food," declares Michael Lomonaco, chef of Porter House in New York City. Though Porter House achieves a more contemporary steakhouse model by offering many different cuts of beef, when it comes to the cooking, Lomonaco sticks with traditional methods. Steaks are broiled—hot and fast. They get the classic "char" that comes with seasoning only with salt and pepper. When the chemical structure of the salt is altered by the interaction of the heat, sugars, and fat from the meat, the result is that mouthwatering crispy exterior. According to Lomonaco, "The diner has a positive visceral reaction to beef cooked in this steakhouse way. It gets the crust. When you cut the steak in half, it's a little too cooked on the outside and rare inside. This is how beef should be. It's openly comfort food." Probably most consumers would ascribe to that technique.

At Peter Luger in Brooklyn, the epitome of the classic steakhouse, co-owner Jody Storch insists that there is no mystery whatsoever to their methods. "We haven't changed anything really from day one." (That would be in 1887.) "Our philosophy is to use the best possible USDA prime beef, which we hand select. We are very, very careful with what we choose. If you use the best possible meat, it's hard to mess up or, conversely, to improve it," she says. Chefs at Peter Luger use a gas broiler fired up to 800°F or better, salt the meat, and then give it a brush of butter before sending it out. Peter Luger does dry age their beef in-house so they are able to carefully monitor their product. As Storch puts it, "When you put the perfect steak under the broiler, between the dry aging and the flecks of marbling melting out adding

more flavor, you get a fantastic result." She giggles slightly and continues, "It's kind of boring really, but that's how we do it!"

In *Seven Fires: Grilling the Argentine Way*, a recent cookbook by Argentine chef Francis Mallmann, the philosophy of the food and the fire is echoed. But even though Mallmann loves the juxtaposition of slightly burnt flavor with the sweet juicy interior of a steak,



he has very specific ideas about how to control the flames, in contrast to the high fast heat most American chefs prefer for their steaks. For Mallmann, it's all about managing the fire, spray bottle at hand to control any flare-ups. Being an Argentine, he has a special affinity for wood fire, a legacy from the gauchos and Indians whose food he celebrates in his book. "A steak that is seasoned and cooked properly has a salty crust produced by searing. Under that crust, the meat should be basically the same rosy pink throughout. This is your goal, and it can be achieved only if you cook the meat at the proper rate, which is relatively slow in comparison to the sear-and-serve method that produces 'black and blue steaks,' which is to say both burnt and raw."

Tom Perini of the Perini Ranch Steakhouse in Buffalo Gap,

Texas, also cooks his steaks over a wood fire—mesquite, a hardwood indigenous to the state. His most popular steak is a rib eye, as is Mallmann's, but he serves a selection of cuts, including the fillet, the New York strip, and a bone-in rib eye. "When you get the wood smoke, flame kiss, and the seasoning, you can really get the flavor of the beef," says Perini. After 27 years of running the ranch, he has the model down. "Cooking over mesquite and flame is difficult. Steak



Previous pages: A block-and-tackle hoist with stanchions set in concrete are set up for cooking *unra vaca entera*—a 1,400-pound skinned, butterflied whole cow—in the manner of Argentine chef Francis Mallmann. Photo by Santiago Solo Monitor from *Seven Fires: Grilling the Argentine Way*. Michael Lomonaco believes in the char, as seen on his porterhouse steak at Porter House in New York City. Photo by Frances Janisch. Left: Wally Malouf carves a roasted dry aged sirloin for his Beefsteak blowout. Photo by Barry Estime. Right: Jim Perini with a cup of joe at his steakhouse in Buffalo Gap, Texas.

cooks hot and fast," he explains. "We keep different areas of heat in the pits and feed it small pieces of wood to be able to regulate the heat." Perini seasons his steaks with a proprietary mix of oregano, garlic powder, paprika, granulated beef stock base, salt, pepper, and cornstarch or flour—quite different in approach from Mallmann and Lomonaco, who stick primarily with a simple salt and pepper seasoning prior to cooking. At Porter House, there is only one steak, a 45 day old rib eye, that gets a chili seasoning rub. The whopping cowboy rib steak on the bone at Porter House is served with no enhancements save for the excellent preparation.

Rubs are popular though, and several of the chefs I interviewed have specific rubs for their steaks. Perini Ranch Steakhouse packages and sells their rub, it's that popular. They also do a mail-order business in their mesquite smoked beef tenderloin. The Capital Grille, a steakhouse chain owned by the Darden Restaurants, offers a porcini rub on their bone-in rib eye and a Kona coffee rub on their bone-in sirloin. According to The Capital Grille executive chef Jim Nuetzl, the rubs are very successful. "Even though we only offer them on the menu with the sirloin and the rib eye, customers often ask for one on other steak cuts," he says. The Capital Grille, which boasts 41 locations, uses an overhead broiler and starts their steaks off at a very high heat to caramelize the surface. Then the heat is reduced to finish them off. As in most restaurants, if the meat is ordered medium or well-done, it's sent into the oven for the final stage.

Brett McKee, chef/owner of **Oak Steakhouse** in Charleston, South Carolina, is a gloriously tattooed, gregarious man from Bay Ridge, New York. Oak Steakhouse has three floors and five dining rooms, and on a busy night serves up to 300 covers. McKee uses a very complex rub consisting of espresso coffee, cacao beans, porcini powder, granulated garlic, fennel seeds, crushed red pepper, salt, sugar, and pepper for all of his steaks. The evolution of this rub came from attending wine seminars where those same ingredients can be used to describe the flavor profiles of wines. He also includes fresh rosemary, sage, and thyme he processes in a spice grinder. Once cooked, every steak gets finished with a brush of olive oil and

butter steeped with slow roasted garlic and fresh rosemary, delivering a tantalizing aroma to diners all around the restaurant.

"I like to blend subtle flavors", he grins, without a trace of irony. "I think it enhances the flavors of both the meat and the wine." McKee cooks most of his steaks over an old-school grill fed with oak and charcoal. "Can I get them done faster with a high-tech broiler? Sure! But I don't cook for efficiency—I cook for flavor."

His secret for getting the steaks out in a timely fashion is to pre-order a certain number, season them, and partly cook them. Then they go into a "speed box," where each shelf is designated rare, medium, etc. When the steak gets a confirmed order, it goes back on the grill, gets the butter brush, and is sent out to the dining room on a sizzle plate. The advantage to this, says McKee, is that "the steaks get to properly rest, so the waiter is not patting down the juices off the plate before presenting them."

Certainly one of the greatest challenges in a busy steakhouse is pacing the cooking. Since different sizes, thicknesses, and degrees of doneness obviously demand different timing, as well as space, chefs have to come up with processes that allow them to deliver their food in a timely fashion. McKee has a speed box, while **Todd Winer** at **The Metropolitan Club** and **The Met Bar & Grill** in Boston uses a Winston holding cabinet, a device that allows him to hold his tenderloins and sirloins at about 110°F until they are fired for service. His jaw-dropping 50 ounce long bone rib eye gets marked on the grill and roasted. But the other steaks are cooked more conventionally to order. They start on the grill and get finished in the broiler. "This method is essential when cooking the steak because it cooks it really fast and releases its water, giving it a nice puffy look as well as melting the fat, which distributes its flavor," Winer says. He offers a choice of three different salts on his steaks—traffiled salt, Sichuan pepper salt, and spice market salt with anise, cardamom, and coffee grounds.

For the past 10 years, **Wally Malouf** of New York City's **Beacon** has been hosting the Beefsteak, a decidedly masculine event celebrating the manly traditions of eating huge amounts of beef and drinking as much beer and whiskey as possible in one evening. The

tradition dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and was often used as a political tool in garnering votes and support. An event like the Beefsteak requires incredible timing and organization. How does a chef feed 300 people at once? For the Beefsteak, Malouf has solved the problem by using a cut that is traditionally portioned and served as a New York strip steak, or shell steak. His secret is to cook the whole shell, as a roast. So though it eats like a steak, it's actually a 10 pound or more roast beef. Beacon brings in roughly 1,000 pounds of shell roasts for this event, hand selected and aged for 36 days, carefully supervised by **George Faison** and **Marc Sarrazin** at **DeBragga and Spitzer**. Malouf roasts the meat, then finishes it on the grill for the traditional steakhouse char. The beef is salted and peppered before cooking.

Not all chefs subscribe to peppering their beef in advance of the flames. **Cesare Casella** of **Salumeria Rosi** in New York City says, "I cook steak without pepper because I like the good flavor of the pepper, not the burning smell of the pepper. Also, you're better able to taste the flavor of meat and the enhancement of the salt." Faison concurs, saying "Just before cooking, season with salt only; great meat has extraordinary flavor; pepper masks this. (Steak au poivre was invented to compensate for bad meat.)" Faison goes on to deliver the goods on his favorite steak, "a 40 day dry aged naturally raised (no hormones or antibiotics) strip steak, graded Prime. Cut at least 12 to 14 ounces. It has to be at least an inch and a half thick. Naturally raised beef has less water in the cell tissue; it actually loses 20 percent less than commodity beef over the same amount of time (30 days) so the muscle has better flavor and a denser texture. This is an awesome chew. Break out the great red wine and eat!"

There are even some renegades out there who don't subscribe to the hot and fast, or even the not so hot and fast.

As an extension of his interest in sous-vide cooking, chef/entrepreneur **Michael Mina** has evolved a rather revolutionary method for cooking proteins. At his two steakhouses, **Bourbon Steak** (Miami, Washington, D.C., Detroit, Scottsdale) and **Stripsteak** (Las Vegas) all steaks are submerged in a vat of melted butter and cooked up to a temperature of around 118°F, which can take from 20 to 45 minutes. Once an order comes in, they are finished on a hot grill running at about 1,000°F to achieve the degree of doneness desired by the customer. Using this technique means that it's virtually impossible to overcook the meat. The butter is flavored with shallots and herbs, imparting additional savory qualities to the steak while preserving its moisture during this gentle cooking. Since it has been basically resting throughout its cooking process, the juices stay well distributed. It allows for exceptional control over both the flavoring and the texture of the finished product.

Nils Norén of The French Culinary Institute in New York City confirmed Mina's technique. "Of course we teach our students the classic ways of grilling, or searing and finishing in the oven. But for our restaurant **L'Ecole**, we either circulate the beef in fat, or cook it in a ziplock plastic bag in a water bath." Using beef fat heated to approximately 132°F, this method of cooking allows the beef to hold for up to five or six hours, with no concern for food safety. Industry standards state that any beef over 120°F is safe. In fact, according to

Norén, holding the steak at 132°F for long periods of time actually pasteurizes it. "We even cook our burgers this way," he says, "and because the meat cooks for such a long slow period, it becomes super tender." For smaller cuts of beef, Norén recommends popping them in a ziplock plastic bag with some liquid beef fat and roasted trimmings to add flavor, then cooking them in a water bath. He points out that the circulating fat bath, or the ziplock plastic bag method works well for every cut of beef with the exception of filet, which he says "gets too mushy when it's cooked for a long time."

The real secret to success at **L'Ecole** is that before the beef goes into its bath, it gets deep-fried for just a few seconds. When it is pulled from the bath for service, it goes back into the fryer for a final crisping, giving it the crust and the look that consumers expect in their steak. **L'Ecole** also uses this method to cook their hamburgers, frying before and after the bath. The advantages to this are twofold: it ensures that the meat is cooked consistently throughout, and it streamlines the process for the line cooks.

An article about steaks would not be complete without a



Left: Brett McKee, chef of the Oak Steakhouse in Charleston, South Carolina. Photo by Diana Deaver. Right: Francis Mallmann threads beef onto a green wood skewer that will fit inside two Y-shaped branch supports set near a fire, an indirect cooking method called a *la vera*. Photo by Santiago Solo Monitor from *Seven Fires: Grilling the Argentine Way*.

mention of the classic sauces and butters that have traditionally been served with them. Béarnaise remains a staple on steakhouse menus; Porter House and Oak Steakhouse offer it as part of the lineup of sauce options. Bordelaise makes an appearance on a few menus as well. Porter House seems to be the only steakhouse that still serves a filet mignon with the venerable *beurre maître d'hôtel*, a compound butter flavored with chopped parsley and a few drops of lemon juice, that was once unthinkable to serve steak without.

Whichever way it's cooked, steak is arguably the greatest crowd-pleaser in American cuisine. Playing many roles, it can be a celebration, a consolation, a reward. As Perini puts it, "When someone does a good job, you don't invite them out for a chicken breast." ■