

Mature cuts to up the steaks

We're too hung up on tender young meat. It might need a good chew, but the taste of beef from Spanish cattle as old as 17 can't be beaten, writes **Corinna Hardgrave**

Food trends these days seem so often to focus on what you shouldn't eat. For the carnivores among us, there is a new cow on the block that you should. Meet the Galician blond (*rubia gallega*) – a breed of cattle raised for beef in northwest Spain, soon to be served in a select few restaurants in Ireland. If you enjoy your steak young and tender, look away now: a Galician blond can be as old as 17 before it is slaughtered.

Irish beef lovers know their indigenous Dexter from their Hereford cousins and may even have tried the eye-wateringly expensive Japanese Wagyu. However, self-respecting gastronomes are beefing up on the distinction between meat that

has been aged and meat from an older cow, and the difference between a cow raised for dairy and one raised for beef. Nowadays, the cow that produces steak a cut above the rest is one we once considered a bit long in the tooth.

While Galician beef has been the most talked-about meat since it began appearing last year on the menus of some of London's more fashionable restaurants, such as Chiltern Firehouse, Kitty Fisher's and Lurra, it has been on the radar in culinary circles far longer. Its spiritual home, Asador Etxebarri – a Basque grill in the Atxondo hills between Bilbao and San Sebastian – has been the chef's pilgrimage of choice for years.

Asador Etxebarri is ranked No 13 on the San Pellegrino and Acqua Panna World's 50 Best Restaurants list, and Victor Arguinoniz, the unassuming self-taught chef who owns it, is considered to be the Ferran Adrià of barbecue. The



Upper cut
Galician blond beef steak has been pioneered by Arguinoniz, left, who grills both sides simultaneously, leaving a deep crimson centre

restaurant features a specially designed pulley system which allows for precise manipulation of the six grills that line the walls of the simple kitchen.

Arguinoniz also prepares his own coal, using different woods to match the ingredients. These range from oysters, eels and sea cucumber to the star: his much-lauded Galician beef steak. Grilled on both sides simultaneously, the result is a dark, crusty exterior and a deep crimson, rare centre.

Prior to visiting Asador Etxebarri last summer, I had heard the depth of flavour of this beef described in reverential tones, the length of it on the palate compared with that of a red wine. Having tasted it first-hand, I can confirm this is beef, but not as we know it.

A trip to Asador Etxebarri, and indeed Bilbao, is a wonderful culinary experience, but there are some credible alternatives in Dublin. "We use a similar type of barbecue to Asador Etxebarri and follow what Victor is doing with interest," says Shane Mitchell, owner of the similarly named Asador (a Spanish word meaning barbecue, grill or spit) on the city's Haddington Road.

"Galician blond has been a source of fascination for me. I got in touch with Nemanja Borjanovic from Lurra in London, who has been pioneering Galician beef there, so it's possible to source it from him. Food critics there are raving about it, so I'm really looking forward to trying the Galician beef he imports."

Another of Dublin's top steak houses, the Butcher Grill in Ranelagh, will feature Galician beef on



Galician blond beef at Asador in Dublin 4

What's your beef?

Asador, Haddington Road, Dublin 4, 01 254 5353

Ring to check when Galician blond will be on the menu. Other steaks include 8oz picanha for €22, a whiskey-flamed chateaubriand, an 8oz rib-eye for €26, a 13oz dry-aged rib-eye on the bone for €32 and a dry-aged côte de boeuf for two for €59.50. asador.ie

The Butcher Grill, 92 Ranelagh Village, Dublin 6, 01 498 1805
A Galician Blond v Hungarian Holstein

evening on April 6 costs €69 and includes starters, main course sides and dessert. A reception drink and glass of red or white wine is also included. thebutchergrill.ie

Harrys, Bridgend, Co Donegal, 074 936 8444

With Derek Creagh as head chef, beef is dry-aged and butchered in house. Steaks cost €17 for a 8oz rump, €27 for an 8oz sirloin and €31 for an 8oz fillet, all served with homemade chips, leaves and

a choice of sauces facebook.com/Harrys-Restaurant

Deane's Meat Locker, 28-40 Howard Street, Belfast BT1, 048 9033 1134

Peter Hannan's 35-day Himalayan salt-aged steaks are served: 300g sirloin for €25, 350g Delmonico rib for €26, 350g rump for €23 and hanger steak for €17; with beef dripping chips and a choice of sauce included. michaeldeane.co.uk

Kitty Fisher's, 10 Shepherd Market, Mayfair, London W1, 0044 20 3302 1661
Highly fashionable and very popular,

but it is possible to get a table by booking online. Be sure to ask for the Galician ribeye steak for two which is not always listed on the menu and is served with potatoes, charred onions and pickled walnuts, €80 for two. kittyfishers.com

Asador Etxebarri, Atxondo, Bizkaia, Spain, 0034 9465 83042
Gastronauts looking for an unforgettable experience can feast on dishes from Victor Arguinoniz's tasting menu, which features exceptional Spanish produce and includes the world's best Galician blond steak €135 plus VAT. asadoretxebarri.com



Galician beef is beautiful. It's pretty much the opposite of the beef we're used to. It has a real depth of flavour

Holstein from the dairy herd, not the beef herd, and give the loins and ribs 35 to 40 days in the salt chamber, and they said they'd take them all. They are probably the fourth lot of people who have asked us the same thing.

"Yes, someone could build a huge business around it. But we are not going down that road ourselves. We are nearly at capacity doing what we are doing, and we are sticking to that at this point in time. I'm not saying that we won't do it at any stage, but it's not on our radar at the moment. It is a little bit fashionable in our opinion; it's a very niche market."

With genuine Galician blond beef about to land in Ireland, the Butcher Grill and Asador are offering an opportunity for a first taste of meat that is at the cutting edge of an eating trend.

"It's an interesting product, it's perfect for what we do here," says Mitchell.

"We will probably look at sharing cuts. So whereas it may be expensive to get a ribeye for one, if you get a tomahawk or a côte de boeuf for two, we can do it. I'm not interested in hitting a certain percentage to make it viable. We will put it on the menu as cheaply as we can. It will of course be more expensive than standard steaks, but I've a feeling that people will be happy to pay a slight premium to try it."

"Is it a little bit faddish? I don't know, we'll have to see. But if it's as special as they say, it will stick around for a while. And if it's good enough for Victor at Asador Etxebarri, it's certainly something we'd like to try."

So just as a whiskey connoisseur might compare a 12-year-old single malt aged in oak to one that has spent 16 years in sherry casks, soon we may be able to choose between a T-bone from an eight-year-old retired dairy cow from Ireland and a Galician blond bullock old enough to sit the Leaving Cert. Either will be delicious, and while not exactly cheap, you will be saving on an airfare to Bilbao.

April 6, as part of its monthly Beef World Cup series. Spain and Hungary will go head to head as diners sample Galician beef and Hungarian Holstein.

"We don't solely use Irish beef and get a bit of backlash from that," says Atish Bhuruth, the Butcher Grill's head chef. "People ask, 'Why is it not all Irish?' But our whole point is that we're all about steak and try to provide the best we can find, wherever it comes from."

"There are so many variables that influence the flavour and texture of beef, from the breed, to what it was fed, to where it was raised. It's not a blind tasting, it's just a fun way of educating people on different types of steaks."

"Galician beef is beautiful. It's pretty much the opposite of the beef we're used to. In London and Spain and New York there is such a high demand for Galician beef that it is hard for farmers to keep up. It's a long slow process to mature these animals and it can't be rushed. That's why it's so expensive. But the meat has a real depth of flavour."

The popularity and limited availability of Galician beef has meant the market has expanded to include similar meats and there has been controversy about quality. Peter Hannan, owner of Hannan Meats in Co Down, says that some of the product coming out of Galicia is not beef that has been reared there. "They are dairy cows from Ireland or Denmark — we know a number of people who are doing this. If somebody comes to Ireland and buys 200 ribs and puts them in an ageing room in Galicia, then sends them to Paris, it's not Galician beef: it's Irish beef that has had a holiday in Galicia."

"That's the weak link in that chain. A number of restaurants have tried that beef and it hasn't been successful, so they've stopped it. The reason is, it hasn't been the genuine article."

Mitchell had heard about this confusion when he started talking to Borjanovic about his beef imports. "When we were ordering the samples I asked questions about two different breeds — the Basque ex-dairy cows and the Galician blond — and said we'd take their advice," he says. "The response was quite interesting."

Borjanovic explained that the Basque beef is imported from Germany, Austria, Poland and even Ireland. "They're mainly Friesian and Simmental cows, retired for four years on grass after a four-year dairy cycle," says Mitchell. "The Basque ex-dairy cows are not necessarily from the area, but the Galician ones are."

"So we're going to be using the Galician blond. I'm only interested in it being authentic, and I think that is important."

Bhuruth at the Butcher Grill has made similar enquiries. "We will be using the Galician Blond which is bred for beef, rather than the steaks from retired dairy cows that are imported from around Europe," he says.

So what exactly does this prized meat taste like? "It's stronger-flavoured, and that will come with age. Beef that's 10 or 12 years old will have a different flavour from beef that's two years old," says Hannan. "It's a different eating experience. It's tougher. We're kind of hung up on tenderness on this side of the world. It's a piece of meat that you're going to have to chew."

Hannan himself uses a specially designed Himalayan salt chamber to dry-age Irish beef, which he supplies to some of the top restaurateurs in London, including Mark Hix. But the taste of beef from an older cow compared with beef that has been dry-aged for a long time after it has been slaughtered is not to be confused, nor should either of these meats taste bad.

Leading the herd At Asador, above top, they will serve genuine Galician blond, above centre; meat from an older cow is 'a different eating experience' says Hannan, above

"There's a difference between an older piece of beef and beef that has been dry-aged," says Hannan. "We have some that is dry-aged for 365 days. You dry-age it to concentrate the flavour. But you shouldn't have any of that blue cheese taste. People talk about aged beef being a little bit gamier, when actually it is meat that has started to decompose."

"There's no nice way of saying this: when that's in play, the meat is starting to rot, it has gone too far. It should never be moist and it should never have mould on the outside. That's a sign of the meat decomposing."

With an increasing demand for older beef, which includes ex-dairy cows of Irish origin, is this a business we should be looking to develop in Ireland? "Yes, it would be possible to produce beef from dairy cows in Ireland," says Hannan.

"We had people here from Paris a few weeks ago who wanted us to take