

Food & drink

To read all the interviews in this series, go to theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/food-and-drink

MEET THE SPANISH COWS RAISING THE STEAKS

In Britain beef is eaten young. Now restaurateurs are turning old milkers into a delicacy, says Ed Cumming

The cool new thing is hot old cow. Over the past year, beef from northern Spain has become the must-order dish in many top London restaurants and won the kind of fans restaurateurs dream about. Nigel Slater raved about the Galician beef he was served at Kitty Fisher's in Mayfair: "Awesome. Totally awesome," he tweeted. Zoe Williams in the *Telegraph* said it was good enough to turn you into a "beef nerd". At Chiltern Firehouse, in Marylebone, Galician fillets fly off shelves into the mouths of celebrities. Our own Jay Rayner even went all the way to Levanter Fine Foods in Lancashire on a quest to rediscover a steak from Etxebarri, in San Sebastian, the best he ever ate.

What have these cows done to become so delicious? Collected their pensions, it turns out. Since BSE and then foot and mouth regulations were introduced in the UK, cows

have had to be younger than 30 months old when they meet their maker. In the US, the fashion is to fatten cows up as fast as possible and slaughter them when they are at their most tender. But there are two sorts of new cow coming from Spain: the Galician Blond, a beef breed that can be anything up to 17 years old when slaughtered, and retired dairy cows, which are brought from all over Europe to the Basque country. There they are given three or four years more grazing to recover from their exhausting milking experiences before being slaughtered at eight years of age or more.

During this time the marbling matures, giving the beef a deep flavour. "The cows get old and fat just as we get old and fat," explains Nemanja Borjanovic. In other words, we are used to eating Channing Tatum but are starting to appreciate Gérard Depardieu. Borjanovic and his partner Melody Adams are almost entirely responsible for the old-beef explosion through their restaurants Donostia and now Lurra, in

Marylebone. Although neither of the pair is Spanish – Melody is British and Nemanja was born in Serbia – both restaurants are Basque inspired. They first discovered the beef on a trip to San Sebastian. Borjanovic was stuck by the "legs" the flavour had, almost like wine. In 2013, two years after Donostia opened, they started an import business, Txuleta, to bring these old Spanish cows to town, and they remain the UK's only major supplier.

"Initially it was difficult in London, because old cows had the stigma of being cheap and tough, designed for dog food," Borjanovic explains. "Butchers rolled their eyes." But eventually they made headway and now have 14 clients. As well as the premium London restaurants, they supply Levanter, and restaurants in Harrogate and Bristol. There are plenty of old dairy cows, but supplies of the Galician Blond are thinner and certain cuts have been so popular that they risk running out. Chiltern Firehouse alone is getting through 50 fillets of the blond per



Basque instincts: Nemanja Borjanovic and Melody Adams serve Galician Blond at their two restaurants Lurra and Donostia



Enjoying her dotage: dairy cows are allowed to graze for three or four years after their milk production has finished



week. It's hard for supply to adjust to demand because it takes the cows so long to reach maturity.

Turner & George, a butcher's in London, stocks Galician beef via Txuleta. "We came across the beef through a French film called *Steak Revolution*, about a guy's quest for the perfect steak," says co-owner James George. "Right up until the last minute his favourite steak was this rare type of wagyu, then he went to El Capricho in Spain and said it was the best he'd ever had. We tried it ourselves, and the taste was phenomenal." They went looking for stock at the same time Borjanovic was offering it. "The fact that they were old cows offset our fears about importing it. It's hyper-ethical,

in a way, because it gives another life to the cow."

In part the Spanish beef's popularity is down to the cooking method. For the past 15 years the consensus among steak chefs has been to cook at a very high temperature for a short time – often on a Jospier grill, used by most of the top restaurants, which can reach up to 800C. The Basque way is to cook the beef more slowly so it gets almost a crispiness around the outside while remaining rare in the middle. "We pass on that advice to our clients," says George. "Quite a few of them come to us having eaten it at Kitty Fisher's or Chiltern Firehouse first." He says there is roughly a 50/50 split among his

customers between London and the rest of the country.

Although old beef is less expensive than some other rare-breed steaks, it is not cheap. At Turner & George, a 1.2kg rib will cost £45; at Lurra, a kilogram of the Galician Blond is £65, and at Kitty Fisher's, it's up to £90. But George says it's better value than other rare breeds. "People are paying silly money for wagyu, extreme prices for beef that's just an explosion of fat, as far as I'm concerned. The Galician is much better priced. Texture wise it's not the most tender steak, but the flavour is fantastic. It's had a huge surge in popularity in the past six months, and I'd say about 90% of the customers who've tried it have loved it." ■

“What have these cows done to become so delicious? Collected their pensions, it turns out