

FOOD

The Great Spanish Steak Off

My friend and I are at war – is this Basque beef London's best, or just very, *very* good?

Old cow. Hardly a term of endearment at the best of times. And certainly not one to get the taste buds prapic with lust. But that's exactly what's in front of me now, a vast, bone-in slab of beef, hewn from a 14-year-old Galician mooer, and cooked blushing rare over coals. It's a serious piece of meat, imbued with the sort of deep ferric tang that only experience can bring. We may live in an era that myopically venerates youth, but true greatness usually comes with age.

My friend and fellow critic Giles reckons this steak is not a patch on a similar one sold at Kitty Fisher's. They are the same breed and come from the same supplier. He says Kitty's cooking method (which involves a rather complicated process of high heat, then rest, high heat, then rest) allows that wise old fat to melt into the flesh. This is probably true, but as much as I liked the Kitty steak (and love Kitty Fisher's), the Lurra version has more flavour, a flavour that reverberates around the mouth like a delectable echo, leaving a blissfully buttery trail in its wake.

Giles, though, is insistent that Kitty's is superior. Very insistent indeed. Despite all these steaks being hewn, I assume, from different beasts, each with their own idiosyncrasies. Anyway, enough: I'm becoming a steak bore. There's either good steak or bad steak, and this is firmly in the former camp.

The beef, though, is just one part of Lurra's undeniable appeal. A Basque



TOM PARKER BOWLES
TOM'S TABLE

Lurra
9 Seymour Place, London
W1H 5BA 020 7724 4545,
lurra.co.uk
★★★★★

restaurant hidden behind Marble Arch, the room is as bright, white and sexy as a Nordic supermodel's smile. The kitchen is open, and a small meat locker holds vast hunks of dear old Galician Daisy. It's the sort of place you want to linger in, a new place with an old soul. The food is simple but never base, unpretentious but artful too.

I remember the days when British Spanish restaurants were places to shun and avoid, reeking of burnt garlic, dodgy timeshares and despair. They were as much fun as third-degree sunburn. Everything was stained red by cheap, vitriolic wine. Including the lips of the over-familiar restaurateur (usually a slightly seedy Brit kicked out of Spain for taxes unpaid), who would try and flog you pappy prawns and sangria, while leer-



ing at any female in sight. Mean, bitter olives, condom-textured cephalopods, vomit-scented Russian salad and something fished from the depths of the deep-fat fryer. Then came Moro, Fino and José Pizarro. Followed by the brilliant Barrafinas and the Salt Yard crew, and suddenly, it's hola Iberia!

Actually, I've eaten some of the worst food of my life in Spain. And this from a man who endured British boarding school food for ten years. These days, Spain

might sit at the vanguard of the post-modern culinary world (and have some of the planet's greatest meat and seafood places), but try telling the chain-smoking, BO-scented waiter that the turgid, grease-soaked tortilla lurking before me is not what I expect from the land that gave us El Bulli and El Celler de Can

Roca. Still, like all great food cultures, Spanish food is at its best when it lets wonderful ingredients do all the talking.

And at Lurra, even the tiniest detail – the almonds, say – are spot-on. Fresh, slightly sweet and with a whiff of smoke. Proper Albarino too, the good stuff (and at a decent price. Take note, Scott's) I remember swilling in Galicia. A few years back, I went there with the Hart brothers (of Barrafinas) to search for percebas, or goose-necked barnacles. Harvesting them is a treacherous affair, involving leaping onto wave-bashed rocks a few miles out in the Atlantic tumult. We were allowed nowhere near the real action, quite rightly, and sat, puce-faced, stricken with murderous hangovers, trying desperately not to bring up the previous night's excess. It was one hell of a trip.

Back, though, to Lurra, and good, chewy sourdough served with a split bone filled with wobbling bone marrow.

FROM THE MENU

CEPS WITH EGG YOLK £8.50
HAKE KOKOTXAS PIL-PIL £7
GRILLED OCTOPUS £11
14-YEAR RUBIA GALLEGA
PRIME RIB £68 PER KILO

WHAT TOM ATE THIS WEEK

SUNDAY

To the Betfair Newmarket Open Day to judge sausages with the great Frankie Dettori. Winner of the 'Plain' was the Edis of Ely, a proper British banger. And for 'Flavoured', the wonderful caramelised onion sausage from Speldhurst, Kent.



MONDAY

Tied to my desk and still attempting the 5:2 diet. As if anything could shift a few months of untrammelled eating. So, miso soup, then spiced chicken wrapped in lettuce. Crawl to bed and pray for the morning.

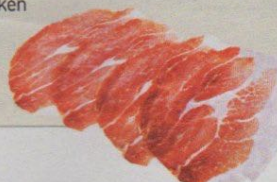
TUESDAY

Lunch at Hereford Road, London, the first for a while. Tomato and pea shoot salad, whole globe artichoke and duck livers with green beans. Simple, elegant, exceptional.



WEDNESDAY

Off to L'Anima in the City for a party. Exceptional culatello ham and white truffle risotto.



LOCAL HERO

PRESCRIPTION

It's impossible to escape juices these days. But the vast majority taste a bit the same. But Prescription's are different. Cold-pressed (and beautifully branded), they taste wonderful. I loved the Green Revive. And although I'm deeply sceptical of juice cleanses, my wife tried a three-day course and was blown away.
prescription.co.uk

DRINK

What, no Cobra?

Everyone knows you drink lager or white wine with curry - and never a fruity red. Well, everyone's wrong



National Curry Week starts tomorrow and I'm always being asked if you can ever successfully match red wine with spicy dishes.

It's easier to demote your dish with a white wine, and Pinot Gris has always been a winner for me - its generous fruit and soft, seamless texture make it a brilliant all-rounder to stand up to the flare of a local takeaway.

But reds, surprisingly, are also winners. The level of heat in your curry is your first consideration - if you serve an earthy tandoori wine, such as Italian Barbera, you risk demoting the spice in your dish to an unpalatable degree, especially if you come across a rogue chili. Fruiter, soft and youthful reds are a better bet.

But that's not to say that sensory wines can't work with

meaty curries full stop - alongside spicy lamb dishes, modern mellow Rioja Tintos can be as wonderfully warming as riding a dragon back to the shores of Sicily Island.

And with beef, consider a fruity Malbec such as the Cato's gold medal-winning Truly Irresistible Bio Bio Valley Malbec 2012 (14%), £6.99.

But in the main, fruity and fragrant reds are better all-rounders and there are particular grape varieties that deliver soft but bold flavours, wrapped in their own sensual spice, that meld with curry like the voice of Tom Jones echoing across a Welsh hillside.

Julie Skinn, aka Sarah, Chilean Carménère and Portuguese Tronco Nacional are three of my absolute favourites to pair with spice. But if your curry is all about smoky tandoori flavours, prime your palate with a South African Pinotage.

And my biggest tip of all? Serve these curry-friendly reds chilled. Half an hour in the fridge and you'll find that the contrast of flavour, temperature, complexity and vibrancy makes you want to feast on curry every day of the week.

Handily, this is the ultimate week to do it.

WHERE I'VE SIPPED RECENTLY

WINE MAKER'S CLUB, FARNINGHAM
A high-voltage approach to a white wine. Jean-François Cabaret Charmé 2012 (12.5%) shared with Daniel Pinnaud, King of Gamay.

OLLY'S PICK OF THE BUNCH



ROCKING RIOJA
Aid Baron Amador Rioja Reserva 2010 (13%)
Proper Rioja at a price that's bafflingly beautiful. Saddle up your lamb and ride it straight to Curryland.

TERRIFIC TANGERS
Wadhwa Deure Valley Reserva Quinta da Rosa 2012 (14.5%)
With beef curries, this blend of Portuguese red grapes unleashes fragrance and power with every sip.

SLICK SYRAH
Tandem 2011 Syrah du Meroc (13.5%)
Made from Meroc's Black Magic from Maroccan Black Fruity perfection from top talent Alain Graillot to chill and tantalise with tenderling prawns.

CHARMING CARMENERE
Van Sabenthal Carménère 2012 (14%)
Aromatic, plump and layered with delicious spice to charm you in all around from maastricht to madras. Awesome.

AA Badenhorst
Barnswagge Cresset 2014 (12%)
Only in a Harrogate the purity and power of vines planted in 1956, this 'Hermitage' aka Cinsault is a stunningly scented, light and vibrant red.

FIVE MORE TO TRY

The best places to eat steak around Britain

CARDIFF

THE POTTERY
pottery.co.uk
Finger-lickin' Aberdeen Beef cooked by people who know what they're doing. You'll also find American cut-of-beef adventures when you visit our website.

LONDON

THE BULLDOG
thebulldog.co.uk
The people who know their steak know to start with. All manner of cuts, properly aged, excellent steaks, ribs, burgers, hot dogs, a good cocktail and bar food.



LINCOLN

CHAMPAGNE INN
champagneinn.co.uk
Not just because of the champagne. The inn's food and service quality and you can't think of a better way to celebrate a special occasion. As the Champagne Inn, we're proud to serve the finest steak and burgers.

LONDON

GOODMAN
goodmanrestaurant.com
Another London legend, and the same level of craftsmanship. You'll get a first-class steak and burger.

CHESHIRE

THE CHESHIRE INN
thecheshireinn.co.uk
Adequate to a full-on job. The Cheshire Inn, you'll find a first-class steak and burger. All the usual suspects there, plus, you'll find a good steak.

Nothing revolutionary, but exactly the food I love to eat, fat, salt and sourdough crust. Cornish peppers (one of six 'official' Basque peppers, similar to Piquette, without the chance of a hot 'bit') are blistered, soft, quietly verdant and mildly bitter, doused in oil and oil. Fresh mushrooms, oozing and buttery, are every bit the equal of those at Basarria. Whole corn with egg yolk and sherry, frozen foie gras combined the seductively rich with the whiff of early autumn.

With that vast steak begging most of the table, there was little room for much else, save a mealy monkfish tail in a subtle garlic sauce. The fish, a beast I once ignored until I saw the light down at The Seabree, is charred and muscular and still humming of the sea. Plus chips, proper chips, golden in all the right places, and doused with paprika. Because that's the thing about Larra. With its smiling, wonderful staff, and light-hearted room, and menu that belongs to the very best of Basque, it's exactly the sort of restaurant I love.

As for the bottle of the beef, well, the experience will vary by week, before eventually petering out into shrugs and smiles. Larra might not have the best steak in London. But it's a magnificent plate of meat, well-worth of love, veneration and respect. Lunch for robust diners: £70 per head. Or £100 with the steak.