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Tash Bell
The love pact
that saved my
marriage
pages 14-15



Food & Drink Toast with the most

Time for our national snack to shine. Plus: brilliant braised cabbage, healthy family suppers and the glory of Glasgow



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WEEKEND

If you only eat one steak this week, make it extra special



Xanthe Clay

Forget Wagyu: real meat geeks eat 17-year-old cows

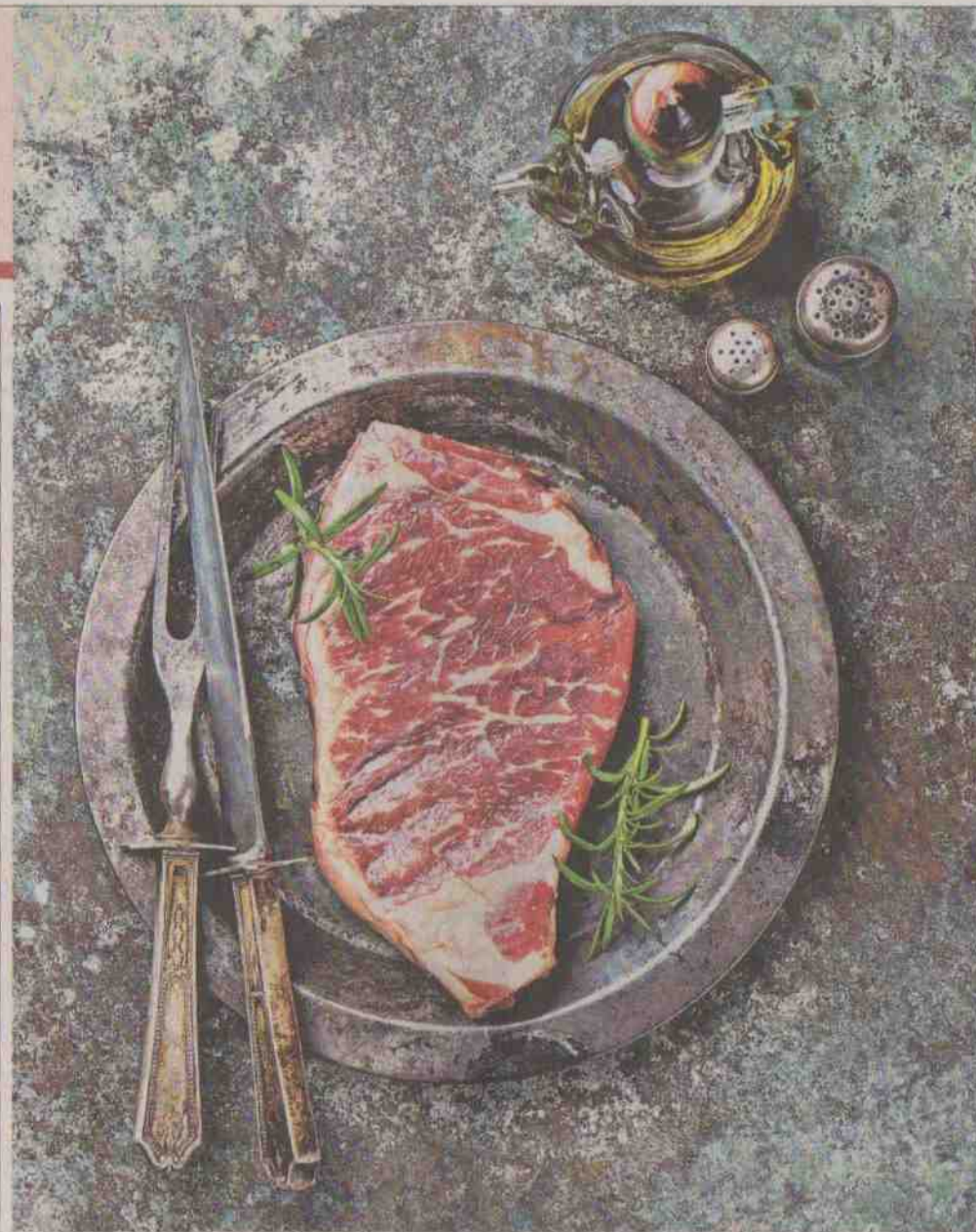
Steak used to be simple. Back in the glory days of The Berni Inn chain – which pretty much defined the UK steakhouse in the Sixties – the choice was between rump or fillet if you were feeling fancy. Sirloin came later and was considered “unusual”. A decade or so ago, when chef Angela Hartnett told me her favourite steak was

a rib-eye, it sounded exotic.

These days, however, it's about far more than the cut. There are health issues to wrestle with: the World Health Organisation sounded a warning bell last month and recent research suggests eating just one steak a week increases the risk of bowel cancer by more than two-fifths. At the same time, many experts advise against giving up red meat, given that it is a rich source of energy and essential nutrients. Moderation, then, would appear to be the key. And if you are eating just one steak a week, it might as well be the juiciest and tastiest hunk of meat you can afford.

But you need a degree in bovine biology to get to grips with the bamboozling range available now. There's the breed: Aberdeen Angus, Hereford, Dexter, Wagyu, to name just four.

Then there is the animal's feed to consider: is it environmentally friendly grass, middle-ground grain or – unsustainable but producing



Raising the steaks: older animals have a deeper stronger flavour that lingers on the tongue

succulent flesh – corn?

I'm not finished yet. The length that the meat is hung or aged, to tenderise it and develop the flavour, is another factor. But is it wet-aged (in a vacuum pack) or dry-hung? The latter is a process that reduces the weight of the animal, and so the butcher's profit, but it produces a flavour most connoisseurs prefer.

And now there is one more question to add to the list. How old was the animal your steak came from? And if that sounds like rampant ageism, it is – right now, foodies are going wild for old Spanish cows. That's old, as in animals that are eight years plus. Most British cattle are slaughtered before they reach two and a half, the age deemed “safe” in the aftermath of the BSE crisis, although the rules are now being relaxed. Restaurants like London's Kitty Fisher's and Chiltern Firehouse, Levanter in Manchester and Bellita in Bristol are selling steaks from middle-aged beef, from animals as old as 17 in some cases.

According to Nemanja Borjanovic, the Serbian-born owner of London restaurants Lurra and Donostia, who imports the beef through his company Txuleta (pronounced chew-letter), older animals give a very different meat, far darker in colour than the pinky-red meat from younger animals that we see in supermarkets. Its flavour is deeper, stronger and, says Borjanovic, “it has length,

Where to try older beef

• Galician beef imported by Txuleta (txuleta.co.uk) is available from Turner and George in London, from £24 for two 400g steaks; turnerandgeorge.co.uk.

• Restaurants selling the meat include Lavanter Fine Foods in Manchester and Sir Dukes in Leeds.

told that your steak is an old Galician milker, then that is wrong. The Galician beef is never from dairy herds.”

It's not common practice to eat dairy animals in most countries, as they have less meat on them, and small prime cuts, which makes them uneconomical to fatten up. But the Basque have a long tradition of eating dairy steak, which they call Txuleton (pronounced chew-let-ton), particularly in their cider house eateries. And no wonder – it has the much sought-after heavy fat marbling that gives flavour and succulence to the meat, as well as that flavour from the older animal.

Got all that? Now it gets more confusing. The Txuleton steak, despite being known as Basque, is from cows who never actually live in the Basque Country. They are raised and fattened in their country of origin, generally Germany, Austria or Poland, and meet their ends there too. After that, the carcasses are sent to the Basque Country, which until recently was the only market for this relatively expensive steak. It's from here that they are imported into Britain generally for further ageing, as the Spanish tend not to hang their meat for

Steak

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aficionados are obsessed with 'super ageing'

like wine. The taste stays with you".

The meat is imported from one of two districts in Spain, Galicia or the Basque Country. The Galician beef comes from animals called Galician Blond, and the prized meat comes from old bullocks (castrated males).

"They are very hard to find, as there's no reason to keep a castrated bull for 10 or 15 years, except as a pet," says Borjanovic. "We usually get about 10 or 15 a year." The fat is very yellow, from the beta carotene in the grass of the cattle pastures, and it speckles the meat "like raindrops", he adds, "because it is slow growing, unlike the big gobbets of fat you get from corn-fed animals."

Basque meat comes from dairy cows who have reached the end of their useful milking life at about four years and are then given four more years "retirement", when they are fed up or "finished" to improve the meat quality and develop fat. Because the Basque and Galician meat has become popular at the same time, there has been some confusion but, as Borjanovic says sternly, "If you are

more than 14-20 days. "Super ageing" or "extreme ageing" is the other obsession of the steak aficionado: 14 to 30 days is common in the UK but more and more butchers are taking this further, inspired by the likes of Peruvian butcher Renzo Garibaldi who ages some of his meat for 300 days, while the Northern Irish meat merchant Peter Hannan, who supplies Mark Hix's London restaurants, goes as far as 365 days. It's not for everyone - the meat picks up distinctly fermented blue cheese flavours, although there should be no mould - but I'd include myself among those who find it delicious, albeit completely different to an ordinary grilled steak.

Borjanovic combines the older meat with longer ageing due to demand from chefs like Nuno Mendes of Taberna del Mercado and Chiltern Firehouse, for whom he is ageing 17-year-old Portuguese Barossa (a similar breed to Galician

Blond) beef for 150 days. But he is more excited by a project to take elderly, unproductive British organic dairy cows and fatten them for the prime meat market. It's early days, he says, but they should know if it is viable by next summer.

How now: a new future for retired British cows?



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