

OLLY OLLY OXEN FREE

Think the best beef in the world comes from a tender young Black Angus? Think again. It comes from a tired old Spanish ox who's spent years under the yoke—and a few minutes over hot coals. Bv Jeffrey Steingarten

MEN'S VOGUE

s happens so often with things like this, it all started with just one word, and the word was *lucy*. That's what the Spanish call an ox.

Three years ago, my wife and I were driving around Basque country in northern Spain, and we stopped at an *asador*, a restaurant specializing in grilling and roasting meat over aromatic wood and charcoal fires.

When we had polished off a beautiful *chuletta* (a chop, which is what the Spanish call a bone-in rib steak), the owner-chef boasted that his meat had come from an eight-year-old *lucy* from the region of Galicia in northwest Spain; the animal had worked all its life and had been fed both grass and grain throughout. As the chef was speaking in Basque and his sous chef was translating into French, I was sure I had misunderstood. And so I spent the next 10 minutes cross-examining him until I became convinced at last that, yes, I had stumbled upon a seriously major and novel gastronomic phenomenon, both revolutionary and earthshaking, and probably outmoded at the same time.

I had reasons for deep suspicion. Everybody knows that steers and cows become incredibly tough as they grow older. Their flesh darkens and acquires a strong, strange flavor. Their well-exercised muscles are shot through with connective tissue, which itself is intolerably tough. That's why, in this country, steers are slaughtered before they reach the age of 30 months, and usually much earlier. (Our cows are slaughtered when they can no longer produce calves or milk in an economical fashion.) Besides which, Spain is not the first country that comes to mind when you think of eating your way through a succulent steak. The city of Segovia is famous for its roast sucking pigs, and Valladolid is the place to go for spit-roasted baby lamb. But nobody has ever heard of eating a grilled ox.

MARbled TREASURE

The Rubia Gallega, or Galician Blond, is arguably northern Spain's proudest cattle breed. These specimens are fattening up on grass near the town of Pedrafita.



Photographed by Raymond Meier

I read everything I could find, which was nothing, and questioned everyone I could think of. My curiosity mounted into a preoccupation, and then into an obsession. Relief finally arrived a year later in the form of Lydia Ito, a Japanese-American friend who writes about food and travel for the European edition of *Time*. Lydia introduced me to two of her Spanish friends who had been to a remarkable rural restaurant named Bodega El Capricho ("The Whim"), which specializes in serving the meat of aged *bovines* and even cows. One of them, Pedro Espinosa, is an IT executive who also writes a weekly restaurant review for *El Mundo*, Spain's second-most-popular newspaper; his friend, Rogelio Enriquez, had blabbed about the same restaurant on his own gastronomy site, pistoypistinos.com. Over the following six months we formulated a plan: I would fly to the town of Bilbao, where I would meet up with Pedro. After three days of dining at several of Spain's leading *asadores*, we would drive most of the way across northern Spain and eat at a *boey* at El Capricho. (For your information, an ox is a castrated male bovine more than four years old; a steer is also male and castrated, but younger than four; a bull has not been castrated. A cow is a female bovine that has calved at least once; a heifer is a female who hasn't.)

Our ox would be immense—a blond, 4,000-pound, 16-year-old specimen (this is nearly the size of a small adult elephant) that had toiled most of its life as a beast of draft and of burden, hauling carts and dragging plows in Galicia until three years ago, when it was discovered by José González Ferrero, the owner of El Capricho in the tiny town of Jiménez de Januz in León, the next region to the right of Galicia. José spends half his time seeking out healthy, very old oxen and cows, buys them, and feeds them generously for about three years. Then, every November, José sacrifices (the Spanish way of putting it) several of his fattened oxen and cows, dry-ages their meat for 90 days, and in February holds his annual *Jornada del Asado* in the *Explanada de la Carne Roja*, a celebration of red meat. The *Jornada* lasts until the meat runs out, about 15 days, during which José offers his clients the chance to dine on this precious, incomparable, primordial protein.

his year would be special because April another five of his well-fed oxen and cows would have grown sufficiently fat to sacrifice; by mid-July, their meat would have been dry-aged for three months, and then it would be ready to be celebrated and devoured. So I flew to Spain, in the middle of July, and in my eight days there, I ate only at *asadores*, and ate steak at every meal.

Pedro and I made San Sebastián our base. Along with Bascos, San Sebastián has become the capital of avant-garde Spanish cooking, the most adventurous in the world. But traditional Basque food still predominates, with its mastery of sweet and hot peppers, salt cod and anchovies, and all the fish and shellfish in the Bay of Biscay. And now I learn to my great astonishment that of the 15 most highly regarded *asadores* in Spain, a clear majority are in the Basque region. Red meat is a part of Basque culture.

We drove immediately to Casa Julián, a renovated *asador* in the town of Tolosa, about an hour south of San Sebastián. We walked through the empty bar, cluttered with cardboard boxes, and into the shabby dining room, where only one other table was occupied. Somewhere behind the scenes was a television tuned to the soccer game. These are details that famous Spanish reviewers relish as an ironic counterpoint to the magnificent meat they are about to describe. But our meat was not magnificent. It was an uninteresting rib steak that had been nicely grilled over charcoal, nothing more. After lunch, we inspected the grill, among the most famous in Spain, because the original Julián, now sadly gone, had invented what became a model for all Spanish *asadores*: The grill is tilted, which guides the melting fat down to a special channel at the lower edge, preventing it from causing flare-ups and allowing the cook to vary the *chuleta's* distance from the heat by sliding it up and down the incline.

We asked where the meat had come from. Asturias was the answer. Like Galicia, Asturias is a region known for its cattle. But as we were to learn, this is a sort of code for a large meat supplier in Asturias called Trassac, which imports meat from Denmark and Germany—sacrificed when the animals are not much over four years old, which just barely earns them the title of ox. It was not worth the voyage.

As Pedro and I drove back to San Sebastián, our mood was subdued. Casa Julián had feet of clay. But I had learned many things, among them that Pedro, who has spent most of his life in Spain and with it, has spent only one year before—and that was seafood—seemed to have exactly the same criteria as I for how a perfectly grilled slab of perfect beef should taste. This supports my long-held theory that judgments about taste are rarely arbitrary and subjective, but are in truth genetic, bequeathed to us all by nature.

This also confirmed my belief that the most delicious beefsteak is a thick about two and a quarter inches) rib steak complete with its long rib bone and its *spinalis dorsalis*, also known as the rib eye cap, the muscle that curves over the top of the eye, the most delicious muscle on the entire animal—tender, rich, juicy, brimming with beefy flavor and with umami. (This is the "savory taste," thought to be a fifth taste, coequal with sour, salty, bitter, and sweet.) And, as I wrote in my second book, the second most delicious (page 13) and the most desirable of all. And that people who prefer any other muscle from the body of a steer—except for the laid-back greasiness of a hanger steak—are confused and lacking in sensitivity, or have defective genes, and should not be permitted to talk about food.

The next day we met up with Lydia and her husband, Alberto Torres, and drove an hour to the other end of Basque country, the Basque Maitica, a famous *asador* outside the town of Gerrika. (This is Guernica's Basque name, pronounced "ger-NEE-kah.") Here, the *chuletas* were cooked over aromatic coals on an uncharacteristically level (not slanted) grill, first close to the heat for a few minutes and then quite a distance away, where they were left for 15 minutes to cook through. Except at one *asador* where the slow cooking preceded the searing, this technique was pretty much universal, yet somehow the flavor of the *chuletas* at Baserrri Maitica was deeper—more profoundly beefy—than the disappointing steaks we had eaten earlier. At dinner we reverted to the tradition at an *asador* just outside of San Sebastián, where we were again served pretty ordinary meat.

What has happened to the proud Basque people, I mumbled to myself, whose ancestors who may have discovered America before Columbus in their exploration for cod; who

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produced Magellan's restaurant, Ekano, who by outliving his captain became truly the first man to circumnavigate the globe; who brought sourdough to the American West, where Basques worked as shepherds; who gave us Balenciaga, the fashion genius; and who—allegedly—figured out how to turn tough old cows and oxen into flesh for the gods? Could it be that their famed *chuletas* are barely better than what you can eat at a steak house in Manhattan, or even at Morton's or Ruth's Chris? At Outback? Was my trip to Spain a total waste of time?

The next two days would answer many of my profound and probing questions but raise a host of others. Pedro and I set out early and drove for four and a half hours across northern Spain, from San Sebastián through the fresh green hills of the Basque countryside, skirting Bilbao and Burgos, and on to León and the tiny town of Jiménez de Januz where, on its dusty outskirts, stands Bodega El Capricho.

We arrived at about 2:00 P.M., the time for midday dinners in Spain, and met up with Pedro's friends Ignacio Medina and Mariano Befino. Ignacio had been chief restaurant critic at *El Financiero* for five years and is one of the deans of Spanish food writing. It was Ignacio who discovered El Capricho three years ago (in the same sense that Columbus discovered America, which of course had done perfectly well all by itself but was unknown to the larger world). Ignacio explained to me that Basques had eaten old oxen since the 14th century and that even 60 years ago all the *asadores* in Spain were in Basque country. As steak became popular in the rest of the country in the sixties, the richer provinces bought most of the best Spanish beef, which the Basques could no longer afford.

El Capricho turned out to be a cave dug deep into the side of a smaller chop from a 14-year-old Mirandesa, a more diminutive breed. The party ate at a shiny gray-black stone, almost like lava. Stone pillars loosely divided the cave into many unbragging spaces, each with tables and chairs. We four settled into a small subterranean cavern, drank some good red wine, and were served a fantastic terrace that I had never before ingested or even imagined: *cecina*, which refers to cured meat in general but which here was country, the best I have ever tasted. The pig of one of José's sons, salt-cured for two years in the style of León, a complicated procedure for which José hires a specialist. When the *cecina* is ready, José slices it into broad, paper-thin sheets so lacy with succulent fat that when you hold it up to the light, it is nearly transparent. The taste is deeper and sweeter, more fatty and meaty, than any cured ham I can think of—with the possible exception of Spain's own, nearly unimaginable *jamon ibérico*, the greatest ham on earth. *Cecina* has been compared to the Italian bresaola, but the *cecina* of León makes bresaola seem no better than the beef jerky they sell at 7-Eleven.

Let's skip ahead 24 hours, when 15 others joined us for the feast—two major winemakers, a hot young chef from Madrid, a fine photographer from San Sebastián, various Spanish food writers and bloggers and their friends, and a

late appearance by Lydia, whose husband had been detained in San Sebastián by a major case of food poisoning. Thank God he lived.

The banquet began with slices of *cecina* and plates of local morel mushrooms in garlic oil, and thick slices of local cépe. Then came a procession of six thick, crusty rib steaks, starting with the smallest and youngest, cut from an 11-year-old Rubia Gallega, the famous blond cattle of Galicia, and dry-aged for 45 days—a long time for a steak in America, but as it turned out, not long enough to tenderize an animal of 11 years. After that we soared from peak to peak, dining on the finest beef of my lifetime, all from animals sacrificed

90 days earlier at ages ranging from 14 to 17 years (close to immortality for an American animal), then dry-aged for the intervening three months (an eternity for an American steak).

One had attended every sacrifice to make sure the animals were handled gently and hung correctly after slaughter. Their meat was vividly maroon, moist but not watery, and firm without being chewy or tough. But it was the flavor that was unforgettable—a deep, concentrated beefy taste, plus the richness of intricate marbling and the pleasantly strong flavor of dry-aging, which never seemed fermented or excessively gamy. The surface of these *chuletas* was well browned with the flavor of hardwood-charcoal smoke, but without the bitterness of charred carbon. It was the *ur-lavor* of grilled oxen, the golden oxen of Odysseus, the crisp roasted flesh one has always searched for.

There was a *chuleta* from a 12-year-old Rubia Gallega ox, a smaller chop from a 14-year-old Mirandesa, a more diminutive breed. The very apogee was a vast *chuleta* (a gigantic *chuleta*) that draped across the platter and onto the table, taken from a massive 16-year-old Rubia Gallega. This was the animal we had been promised weeks before, and it was probably the greatest steak I've ever eaten. It was followed by another small chop from a 15- to 17-year-old Mirandesa. The party ended at El Capricho with an unmitigatedly successful experiment, a *chuleta* from a cow sold it had probably forgotten its day of birth; the meat of the poor thing had been unable to withstand the 90 days of aging, and its flesh had become mushy.

Most *asadores* grill their *chuletas* over glowing charcoal somewhere between very rare and medium rare. José González Ferrero uses a method at El Capricho that some of his customers might question more sharply were his meat not so uniquely fine. He removes the *chuletas* from the grill when the outside has been deliciously seared but the insides are almost raw—shiny and jellylike. Meanwhile, he heats earthenware terracotta plates over open

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