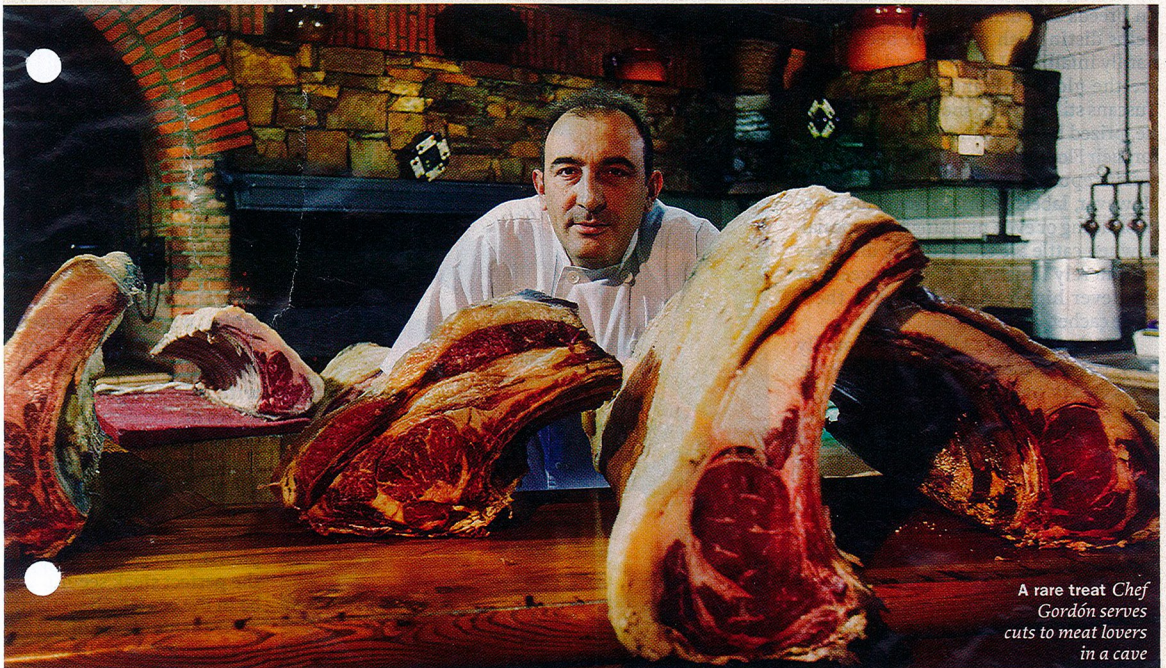


Fred said "I do" from Korea,
and Katie from Missouri, with
family and friends

JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN, ON WEDDING VIA WEBCAM

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A rare treat Chef Gordón serves cuts to meat lovers in a cave

FOOD

Where's the Best Beef? A quest for the perfect steak leads us far from the madding world of plastic wrap and supermarkets

BY LYDIA ITOI/SAN SEBASTIAN

NO WONDER GOOD STEAK IS HARD TO FIND: it's going extinct, along with the elderly cattle it comes from. For years I have been chasing down the secret to the ultimate steak, and I had reason to believe it lay somewhere in northern Spain. So Madrid-based food writer Pedro Espinosa agreed to meet me deep in the Basque hills surrounding San Sebastián, from where we would eat our way cross-country to El Capricho, a restaurant near the tiny town of Jiménez de Jamuz in the northwestern

province of León. We knew that José Gordón Ferrero, the restaurant's beef-obsessed owner, had been rounding up old, free-ranging oxen, pasturing them for up to four years, and then dry-aging the meat for as long as three months. When I heard that he planned to slaughter five of these rare beasts for a side-by-side comparison of the effects of long aging on mature beef, I realized that for a mere \$68 a kilo, I could settle the best-beef question for good.

It's no idle question. Despite concerns about hardening arteries and bovine

spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or mad cow disease), the average American still eats 95 lbs. (43 kg) of beef a year, and the average European puts away 40 lbs. (18 kg). Yet in taste terms, little of the 66 million tons of beef produced annually is worth the cholesterol it contains. All too often, unwitting consumers splurge on a steak dinner and end up with shoe leather. Thanks to anti-BSE measures and rising feed prices, most cattle are slaughtered at less than 30 months; they're too young and too crowded in feedlots to develop profound beef flavor. Too many

We gorged ourselves on the deep, primordial flavor of beef as it was meant to be

consumers have been led to believe that bright red, moist, plastic-wrapped meat will yield a succulent steak. The lives of cattle and humans alike would improve if people applied the golden rule of intelligent consumption to beef: less but better.

But it's not that simple, of course. The more beef I ate, the more paradoxes and marketing myths I found. A new emphasis on breeds and denominations of origin helps distinguish premium beef, but is hardly infallible. Limousin and Charolais are the glory of France, while modern Tuscans still sacrifice snowy Chianina cattle, prized by the Romans and Etruscans, for their Florentine steaks. Brits stake their *rosbif* reputation on Aberdeen Angus. However, labels of origin are sometimes misleading or even meaningless, especially when cattle are trucked long distances and merely finished for a few weeks at whatever highway exit will give them more cachet.

For the ultimate steak, you usually have to go farther than the local hypermarket. My own high-steaks investigation has taken me down some pretty twisted cattle trails. I've spent days on a bus pilgrimage of barbecue joints in Texas and a fortune on *wagyu* in Japan. I've eaten raw Arctic musk ox with my bare hands at Copenhagen's cutting-edge Nordic restaurant Noma, and I even took my husband to a strip club after I was tipped off that the best meat in Manhattan was to be had at Robert's Steakhouse in the Penthouse Gentlemen's Club. But after several samples of charcoal-grilled *chuletón* or prime rib at restaurants like Etxebarri in Axpe and Casa Nicolas in Tolosa, my radar homed in on northern Spain.

There, I was prepared to eat steak twice a day in search of its secret. At Restaurante Baserri Maitea outside Guernica, Juan Antonio Zaldúa served us one gigantic Rubia Gallega (Galician Blonde) rib-eye chop and an even bigger, more marbled German one. Marbling is largely genetic and, as an indicator of quality, a myth; it signals juiciness but not flavor. The leaner, leggy Galician Blonde was just as tender as the fattier German. Zaldúa claims that the sum qualities of an individual animal—feed, upbringing, genetics—are more important than breed or regional origin. The best beef is raised free-range on grass, with whole cereal and

hay over the winter. Zaldúa says that two weeks of aging will tenderize the best meat, while no amount of aging can save the toughest.

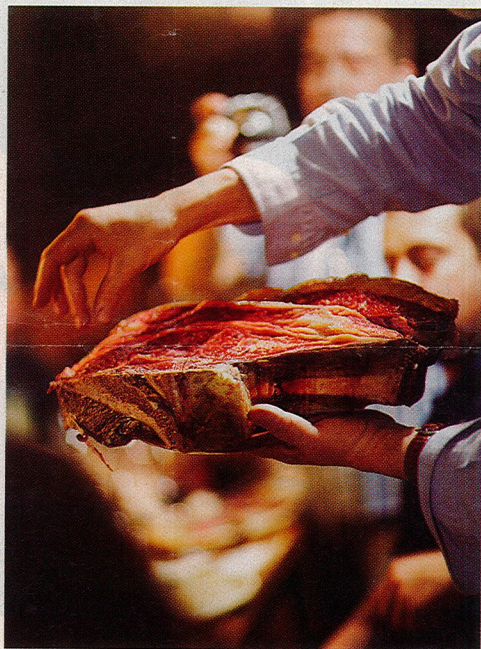
Science seems to back him up. Even among purebloods of impeccable provenance, it is nearly impossible to tell in advance which one holds the ultimate steak, for individual animals vary dramatically. Recent studies point to variations in genes for specific compounds like myostatin and calpain as factors in determining tenderness, but it would take between 20 and 40 years to breed toughness out of meat.

Yet even the most genetically blessed beef can turn tough if it is not treated properly. Chilling the meat immediately

vorful, I was also ready to challenge the received wisdom that animals older than 30 months are too tough to eat. In fact, age in both respects may be the secret to the übersteak. To find out, I'd have to go to El Capricho and try its dry-aged meat from superannuated cattle.

After a dusty 150-mile trek, I came face to face with a majestic 3,000 lbs. (1,400 kg) Palencian steer named Makalele, as terrible as the ancient aurochs. A nearby barn housed two more of the six retired farm animals that Gordón has been collecting from all over rural Spain and Portugal for his little restaurant. After a life of flavor-building labor, they are boarded here until they become sleek and relaxed from eating hay and grain, avoiding heifers, and listening to Latin disco pop. After sending them to that big pasture in the sky, he ages the meat at 32°F (0°C) for between 40 and 100 days.

In El Capricho's private underground dining room, the meat came practically raw and boneless to the table, where we cooked piece after piece on earthenware platters sprinkled with salt. We gorged ourselves on the deep, primordial flavor of beef as it was meant to be, full of days spent in the goodness of open fields. Somehow in the cholesterol-induced euphoria, my brain noted that the perfect steak seemed to be in the center rib section, aged for 90 days, of a 16-year-old Rubia Gallega ox. It was meltingly tender, yet tasted like a whole herd of stampeding longhorns. As the rich, beefy juices flood-



High steaks Perfect beef is a combination of genetics and patience

ed my mouth, I discovered that eating aged beef from mature cattle is like savoring a fine old wine. With time, the power of raw youth becomes nuanced, complex and profoundly delicious.

Producing the ultimate beef is simple, really. All you have to do is get an ox with the right tenderness genes, subject it to rigorous exercise, then retire it to sumptuous grass pastures for at least 10 years. Slaughter it under the most stress-free conditions possible, let the meat cool slowly, and dry-age it until it reaches perfection. Then expertly grill it over live coals until it is rare with a warm center. Granted, perfect steak is uncommon. But the good news from Spain is that it does exist. ■

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