

→ The first time I went to a butcher was in college. I wish I could say it was my idea, but the inspiration belonged to my roommate, Robert, a sophomore from Burbank, California, who was trying to transform himself into a sophisticate who knew the best vintages of the past ten Bordeaux and Napa harvests. (He memorized the cheat sheet in *Wine Spectator*.) Robert decided that we would invite friends over for a steak dinner and that we would, in his words, serve the finest beef known to mankind.

Now, this was fifteen years ago, long before the current fascination with meatmen—butchers weren't photogenic dudes with tattoos, they were middle-aged guys with missing fingers.

Our neighborhood butcher shop was busy and reassuringly spotless; the tile floor sprinkled with sawdust. It was only when our number was called that I realized Robert didn't have a plan. The butcher asked what we wanted, and Robert calmly stepped behind me and gave me a little push.

I didn't know what to say. Of course I'd eaten steak, many times, but I had never bought any, and when I scanned the glass case I was intimidated by the abundance of beautifully marbled beef. Only one cut came to mind, a miserable steak I recently had that was gray and chewy.

"I don't want London broil," I said. "Then don't get it," the butcher said.

Luckily, butchers live to elucidate.

After some basic questions (budget, ambitions, skills), the butcher gave us a short tutorial, steering us away from bland tenderloins to more flavorful New York strips. Then he explained how to sear the meat, how to let it rest. He gave us a bag of coarse salt mixed with cracked pepper. As he spoke, he jotted the instructions down on a piece of paper, and when he handed us our steaks, he told us to come back and tell him how it went. He was sincere.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 3)

PHOTOGRAPH BY CEDRIC ANGELES

Eat

1 of 3 →

## Why Every Man Needs a Butcher

By Oliver Strand

A new wave of young cleaver masters are reviving not only a lost art but also a lost pleasure. Get to know your butcher and you won't just save yourself time (yes, he'll butterfly that for you) and money (for free!), you'll learn how to make a skirt steak or a stack of short ribs taste more succulent than you ever imagined. Here's how to get the most out of your meat man

# M

Eat **2 of 3**

## Butchers

It was a seminal afternoon for me. But I've since learned that for the man behind the counter, it was just another workday. A butcher shop is one of those institutions, like a good barber or a tailor, that are as much clubhouses as commercial enterprises, except you're granted membership simply by stepping through the door. And lately, more doors than ever are opening. A new generation of butchers are setting up shops from Brooklyn to San Francisco. Whether you choose a new-school spot or a joint that dates from before you had canines, know this: It doesn't matter if you're advanced (you special-order game), intermediate (you know the cut you want), or beginner (porkchops? chicken breasts?)—cutting meat is the butcher's trade, but his art is making shopping for it the best part of your day.

Here's what to keep in mind before stepping up to the counter.



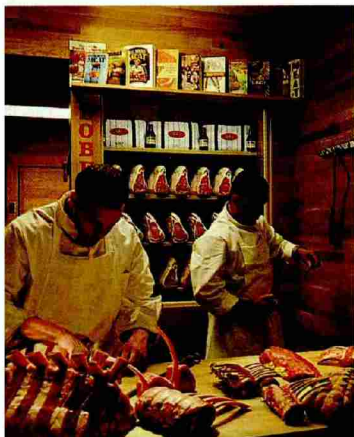
### TALK TO YOUR BUTCHER

The butcher *wants* to know what you're planning on cooking and how much you want to spend, how many guests are coming for dinner, and whether you're an experienced cook. This is true even of supermarket butchers, from Whole Foods to Winn-Dixie, who have started stepping up their game to meet the standards of more demanding carnivores. When dealing with a butcher, just follow the advice of Stanley Lobel, an owner of Lobel's ([www.lobels.com](http://www.lobels.com)), on New York's Upper East Side, a shop well-known for its exceptional service. "Ask questions," says Lobel. "What should I get? Is there anything I should try? All these guys know what they're talking about."

### MORE

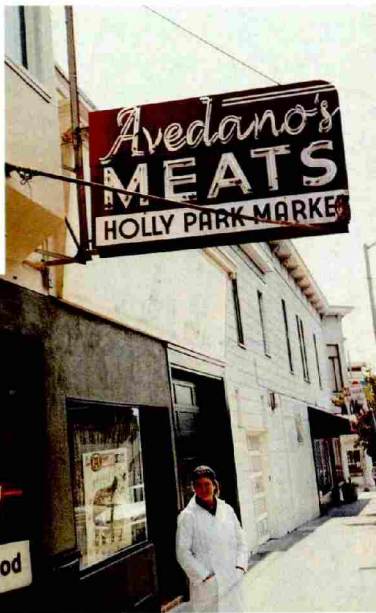
Food-and-wine wisdom in **Alan Richman's** online archive and blog

GQ.COM



### THEN MAKE HIM WORK FOR YOU

In a mysterious, precapitalist take on service, any trimming, trussing, boning, or other custom cutting you ask a butcher to do is included in the price of the meat. You can get anything cut to order (those steaks and roasts sitting in the display case are only a teaser—there's plenty more in the back) at no extra cost. Request veal outlets for schnitzel, for instance, and he'll pound them paper-thin—some butchers will even season and bread them for you. Get a whole chicken and you can have it trussed or quartered or boned. (Note: At supermarkets like Whole Foods, the poultry's usually in a refrigerated case separate from the meat counter; if you want yours prepped for dinner, just grab it and bring it over to the butcher.) Like your porterhouse a hefty two and three-quarters inches thick? Just ask for it. Or if you're trying to impress your friends to the point of intimidation, request a couple of racks of pork. You can have the butcher crack the chine (that's the backbone), section the loin, and cinch the whole thing with twine into a crown roast worthy of a nineteenth-century banquet. None of these bespoke preparations are extra, and none of the butchers I spoke with know why, exactly—it's just what they do.



### TAKE ME OUT TO THE BUTCHER SHOP

AT THE NEW LOBEL'S AT YANKEE STADIUM, YOU CAN GET AN AGED STRIP TO GO OR A JUICY STEAK SANDWICH TO EAT IN YOUR SEAT.

### GRADE A

AVEDANO'S IN SAN FRANCISCO BUTCHERS A WHOLE ORGANIC STEER, PIG, AND LAMB EVERY WEEK. THE EGGS AND BUTTER THEY SELL ARE JUST AS FRESH.



### ASK FOR RECIPES

A good butcher has a few favorite recipes on hand. Sometimes his cooking tips are straightforward: the right way to make a pot roast, how to sear a steak. But if you give him the opportunity, he will completely alter (and dramatically improve) your dinner. I posed a scenario to Adam Tiberio, the head butcher at Dickson's Farmstand Meat in New York's Chelsea Market ([www.dicksonsfarmstand.com](http://www.dicksonsfarmstand.com)): a get-together with a group of rowdy friends fueled by last year's vintage of brawny Malbec. "I'd steer you to big flavor," he said, "like a whole plate of short ribs, what they call *costela* in Brazil." Then he outlined a recipe as brief and pure as a haiku: short ribs (use a paring knife to poke holes all over), one can of beer (any lager), salt (about a teaspoon per pound), and pepper. Roast (covered tightly with foil at 375 degrees for twenty minutes, 275 degrees

### THE DIY STEAK-HOUSE DINNER

Season a boneless aged rib eye and sear—3 to 7 minutes per side, depending on thickness—to a bloody medium-rare.



1 | A standard steak is about an inch thick, but if you want a two-inch rib eye, ask and you shall receive. Even an indulgent three-inch-thick T-bone—about the size of a bistecca torentina, the legendarily massive Italian cut—shouldn't be a problem. Of course, the price will go up accordingly.



# M

Eat

3 of 3

## Butchers

for three hours; then remove foil and finish at 400 degrees for the last twenty minutes; rest; serve.

RULE  
No. 4

### BUY LOCAL PORK

A new generation of butchers do more than stand behind their meat counters; they stand behind their meat. The heritage pork sold at shops such as Dickson's and Marlow & Daughters in Brooklyn (www.marlowanddaughters.com), for instance, is sourced from Berkshire, Large Black, and Tamworth pigs raised on local farms—and more often than not, the butcher has a personal relationship with the farmer. (By comparison, most American beef and pork are processed and packaged in the Midwest and Texas, then shipped around the country.)

And if the butcher is getting the farm's best animals, you're getting the farm's best meat. It's a qualitative difference that's superbly clear in heritage pork, genetically pure breeds that grow slower (they aren't force-fed) than conventional hogs and yield meat far more savory.<sup>2</sup> Once you've had a rack of Red Wattle, there's no going back.

RULE  
No. 5

### VENTURE BEYOND STRIP STEAK

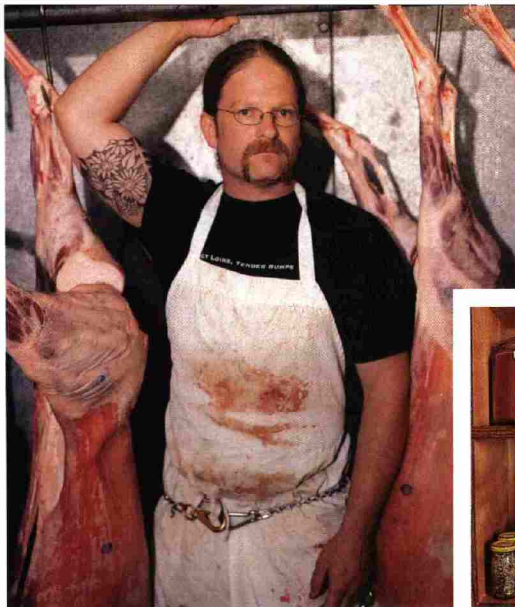
A cow isn't all steaks, or what Tiberio calls the "middle of the cow": the strip, rib eye, and overpriced tenderloin. There are tougher cuts (chuck, brisket) that turn meltily tender when braised; organ meat (heart, sweetbreads), which is easily grilled; and other off cuts (trotters, heads) that reward ambition in the kitchen.

And if it's steak you want, you can experiment. "Certain cuts are popular because people want what they've seen on a menu," said Melanie Eisemann, one of the owners of Avedano's (www.avedanos.com), which opened in San Francisco in 2007. Try overlooked—and cheap—skirt steak, for instance, or one of the unsung cuts butchers are carving. Joshua Applestone, the co-owner of Fleisher's in upstate New York (www.fleishers.com), trims sirloin flap and calls it "faux hanger." Like skirt, it's flavorful, affordable, and excellent grilled.

RULE  
No. 6

### DON'T FORGET THE BONES

Sold for pennies a pound at the butcher, bones are where the serious flavor's at. Buy a bag of chicken or veal bones, add water, some carrots, onion, and celery, and simmer for a couple of hours<sup>3</sup> for a rich stock. Your



### WANT CRACKLIN'S WITH THAT?

ASK JOSHUA APPLESTONE AND HIS WIFE, JESSICA—OWNERS OF FLEISHER'S MEATS IN UPSTATE NEW YORK—THE BEST WAY TO COOK YOUR ORGANIC DOUBLE-CUT PORKCHOPS AND THEY'LL PROBABLY TELL YOU ALL YOU NEED IS SALT, PEPPER, AND HEAT. IT'S TRUE.



### APPETIZER À LA ST. JOHN

Roast veal marrow bones in a 450-degree oven for 15 minutes or till golden. Serve with toasted bread and a parsley salad.



### THE DINNER-PARTY GRAND SLAM

Stick a crown roast in a 400-degree oven till a thermometer registers an internal temperature of 135 degrees (a rosy medium).

risotto—or soup or pasta or anything that calls for stock—will never be the same again.

Marrow bones, which you can also get for a couple of bucks, are a whole other story: Roasted in the oven at 450 degrees for about fifteen minutes and served the way Fergus Henderson, of the renowned London restaurant St. John, likes it—with crusty toast and a parsley salad (splash of olive oil, squeeze of lemon, generous pinch of coarse salt)—they make for a transcendent appetizer. Have the bones cut into three-inch pieces and invest in some skinny forks (or if you're really going for it, marrow knives). Some restaurants, like Minetta Tavern in New York, cut the bones lengthwise to create a trough that makes the marrow easy to scoop out—ask your butcher if his band-saw skills are up to it.

RULE  
No. 7

### HAVE YOUR BURGER MEAT GROUND TO ORDER

Hamburgers aren't actually made with ground beef—the professional term is "chopped beef." A good butcher uses fresh meat and sharp blades so that what comes out of the machine has body and a light texture and will retain moisture when cooked; he'll also make a fresh batch daily. The standard is chuck, a tasty stewing cut. But you might take a cue from restaurants like Shake Shack in New York and Father's Office in Santa Monica and ask for a custom blend.<sup>4</sup> One couple I admire start their summer weekends with a few pounds of burger meat that's a mixture of chuck, sirloin, and, the kicker, slab bacon.

<sup>2</sup> With beef, you'll hear less about breeds than you will about feed. Grass-fed meat has a stronger flavor and leaner texture that might not appeal to those who prize the fatty marbling of corn-fed steaks.

<sup>3</sup> For a richer stock, roast the bones at a high temperature until browned, then simmer in a stockpot. The minimal extra time and effort is the difference between a good and a great dish.

<sup>4</sup> Hamburger meat should be at least 20 percent fat, though some memorable blends go as high as 30 percent. If it sounds indulgent, it is. But don't tell your friends it's fatty; say it's "rich."