

The petite tender is the only steak offering at Atega in Denver.

CATTLEMEN'S BEEF BOARD AND NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSN.



Cash Cows

While prices for beef and veal soar, some chefs have found innovative ways to offer tasty 'new' cuts while increasing profitability.

BY KATIE AYOUB

How does a 19% food cost on a steak sound? Pretty juicy, particularly coupled with great sales. Or perhaps you'd like to offer one steak entrée, but hope to menu a more-exciting dish than the filet. Maybe you're a member of the growing world of upscale casual that offers elegant tabletop with reasonable prices. Less-expensive cuts of beef and veal is your mantra. The trick is knowing what's out there and how to get it.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association, based in Centennial, Colo., funded muscle-profiling research last year. The industry was looking for untapped potential in cuts usually used for ground beef and roasts. The three new cuts gaining reputation are the ranch, petite tender and flat iron—all from the shoulder clod. The flat iron, cut from the top shoulder of the chuck, is the breakout runaway hit of the series. The petite tender, from the top of the blade

on the chuck, is right on its heels. And the ranch, taken from the center of the shoulder, brings up the rear.

Behind Door Number 2 is veal. New cuts haven't surfaced, but underutilized muscles, are—well—making the cut. The veal chop and cutlet are making room on the fire for veal breast, veal ribs and an osso buco featuring the fore shank instead of the hind. Revolutionary? No. We're not reinventing the cow, but lower food cost, menu excitement and chef ingenuity are driving these underutilized cuts into the spotlight.

Flat iron—it's what's for dinner.

A couple of the chefs we spoke to about the flat iron pleaded with us not to tell other chefs about this steak. They were kidding, of course, but the point is well made. Menu differentiation in a saturated market makes

a positive impact. And offering diners a steak with Tuesday-night prices instead of Saturday-night-out prices brings them in all week.

“The flat iron cuts like a filet and eats like a sirloin,” says Jim Gardner, owner and president of 12-unit upscale-casual concept Whiskey Creek Wood Fire Grill based in Kearney, Neb. It’s his No. 1-selling steak, beating out reigning steakhouse champs sirloin and filet. Whiskey Creek was the first chain to menu flat iron, and it’s never looked back.

Introduced on the menu early in 2002, Gardner says server incentives and careful marketing helped launch the cut successfully. “We really had to educate the staff on how to describe the flat iron. We didn’t want them saying it was from the shoulder, because of the preconception about that cut. We trained the servers to say that we were offering a tender, new cut with the flavor of a sirloin,” says Gardner.

Whiskey Grill’s 8-ounce flat iron is wet-aged for 21 days, rubbed with proprietary seasoning, then grilled on the wood fire. It’s served with a choice of two sides for \$9.99 and runs a food cost of 33%.

Gardner admits there was a learning curve with the flat iron. “It has a sinewy tendon running down the middle that’s hard to see. We had to work with our processor to make sure that was always completely removed,” he says.



THE VEAL COMMITTEE

David Burke custom orders a veal filet on the bone for his veal tenderloin with candied-lemon sauce at david burke & donatella.

Apparently, size does matter with this cut. “We had a 12-ounce portion, but the cooking was too uneven because of the nature of the cut—it’s thicker in the middle and thinner on the ends,” says Gardner.

At La Renaissance in Pueblo, Colo., the flat iron is so successful, it replaced the sirloin on the menu. The 8-ounce steak is offered simply grilled with compound butter melted atop or served Southwestern style, which is grilled with Anaheim green chiles and Monterey Jack cheese, then smothered with more green chiles. The steaks are part of a five-course meal that includes a signature appetizer, tableside soup and salad, sides and dessert. “For the flat iron, we run a 19% food cost. All of my other steaks, the prime rib, etc., run close to 40%,” says Straud Fredregill, co-owner of La Renaissance. “I have never had anything as successful as the flat iron, and I’ve been in business 45 years,” he says.

He also reports a learning curve with this cut. “I’m really particular about who I buy it from, because not everyone cuts it properly. Also, the shelf life is shorter than that of other steaks,” says Fredregill.

Love me tender
“I was looking for a steak that not many chefs were using. We’re not a steakhouse, but we’re in Colorado, so people expect it on our menu,”

says Bryan Moscatello, chef/partner of AdegA, a high-end innovative American cuisine restaurant in Denver. He chose the petite tender, a cut described by fans as tender and juicy that offers upscale plate presentation similar to beef tenderloin. Moscatello marinates the meat in herbs, garlic, extra-virgin olive oil, apple-cider vinegar and apple slices. He then sears it in a sauté pan, tops it with whole butter and fresh herbs, then roasts it in the oven. “The butter is important because it introduces fat to this really lean cut. It’s lean, but it has a good chew. It eats like a New York,” says Moscatello. He serves the petite tender on his winter menu with Israeli couscous prepared risotto style with ancho paste, blue cheese, corn and tomatoes. It sells for \$24 and runs a 28% food cost.

The ranch cut hasn’t gained momentum in foodservice yet, but the NCBA reports that it offers outstanding beef flavor and is similar in

A Cut Above



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The flat-iron steak cuts like a filet and eats like a sirloin, say those who menu it.

texture to a top sirloin. Stir-fries and kabobs are two recommended preparations for the ranch.

Keeping it veal

The underutilized cuts of veal offer wide profit margins, according to two Chicagoland chefs. “They may take a bit more time than throwing a veal chop on the grill, but you can make a ton of money because it’s inexpensive,” says Michael Tsonton, executive chef of Eli’s The Place for Steak, Chicago.

He menus a stuffed veal breast for \$23 with a 31% food cost. Each bone-in breast yields four to six orders. “My other meat items run a 43% to 48% food cost, and I have to make the comeback with sides and salads,” he says. For the veal breast, he first makes a stuffing with breadcrumbs, fresh herbs, summer onions, sherry, white wine and egg. “The stuffing keeps the lean veal breast moist,” he explains. He cuts a pocket in the breast, stuffs it, and then ties the ends. It roasts for 15 minutes at 425°F, then 375°F for 15 minutes, then 325°F until medium. It’s then

sliced off the bone to order. Tsonton uses the bone and juices to make a pan jus. “I run this as a special, and when I run it, it sells out. People want to try something different,” he says.

At Carlucci’s in Downer’s Grove, Ill., John Coletta, executive chef of Carlucci’s Hospitality Group, looks to underutilized cuts of veal for numerous dishes. He serves a grilled 12- to 14-ounce marinated veal skirt steak with an arugula salad and poached grape tomatoes with balsamic syrup for \$20. “It’s a great value for our cus-

tomers and only runs a 25% food cost,” says Coletta.

“We have to create great price/value relationship. The perception of veal is elegant, but usually small portions,” he says. “Diners are happily surprised with larger pieces of meat at lower prices.”

In the winter, he braises veal short ribs with leek, carrot, celery, onion and red wine, then crisps them in the oven. His food cost is 20% on this \$19 entrée. “Veal ribs are bland, so you need to season them, but again, veal is elegant. It matches our concept because it’s more refined,” says Coletta. “In upscale casual, cooking technique can be fancy, but you need to use these less-expensive cuts of meat to keep the prices reasonable.”

For Carlucci’s osso buco, he uses the fore shank rather than the traditional hind shank of the veal, for about one-quarter of the price. “They cook the same. You french the bone so they stand up, and put two on a plate for \$22, and run a 22% food cost. I need a point of difference with my competitors. Lesser-known cuts of meat give me that edge,” he says. □

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Think outside the butcher

We’ve grown accustomed to David Burke’s playful, inventive dishes. Former vice president of culinary development for Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group, he’s now at david burke & donatella, also in New York. For its opening, he wanted a dish with presence. He thought a classic veal filet with the bone left in would offer stunning presentation.

Burke contacted Michael Mosner, president of David Mosner Veal and Lamb, an East Coast meat packer. “David set himself apart with this request,” says Mosner. To get the cut, the leg had to be broken a different way. The result was the butt tender of the veal leg on the bone. The dish manifested as a grilled filet seasoned with sage olive oil, served with a candied-lemon sauce.