

# Fat *is Phat*

Fat has been the secret workhorse of the professional kitchen, but now chefs are bragging that fat is in vogue

**C**hefs know that fat deepens flavor, crisps skin like nothing else and enriches sauces to satin perfection. Chefs also know that fat gets a bad rap. Indeed, most classically trained French chefs don't print on their menus that they occasionally sauté foie gras in duck fat. Neither do some chefs confess to dunking steamed broccoli in rich chicken broth before service. Diners have traditionally wanted lean and mean. So it's the culinary world's little secret: fat is where it's at.

But popular culture changes. The wildly popular Atkins Diet embraces fat. Order a rib-eye with a pat of compound butter and lose weight! Oh, and a plate of cheese for dessert, please. Yes, fat. No carbs. And although the entire nation isn't following this diet, its principles are seeping into our collective consciousness. The nutritionist-recommended food pyramid may not have shifted, but our paradigm has.

And even those unmoved by the bandwagon have perhaps chewed their last morsel of lean, tasteless beef filet. Or a pork chop so devoid of marbling that it dries out with just a touch of neglectful grilling. Now that the world has opened its heart to fat, why not utilize cuts and preparations that guarantee delivery of delicious flavor and satisfying mouthfeel?

Kobe-beef burgers are making headlines. Chefs are demanding fatter pigs from their purveyors. The trade-off is amazing—diners are licking their chops in glee and chefs are reporting lower food costs.

## Is fat back?

"Fat never went away. Chefs just didn't flaunt it on their menus, but we're now able to market it," says Tim Andriola, chef/co-owner of Timo in Sunny Isles, Fla.

Paul Kahan, chef/owner of Chicago's Blackbird, agrees. "Fat's never gone away, but we've always disguised it. Now, diners are being more realistic about it. They're figuring out that anything in moderation is OK," he says.

"We're coming out of the closet and not hiding the fact that we're using fat

in our food. We have very educated consumers these days who know fat makes good meat. Prime beef is chock full of it," says David Walzog, executive chef of Strip House, a three-unit steak house based in New York.

Even the American steakhouse, famous for well-marbled meats, can now boast an even fattier cut than sirloin or rib-eye. Kobe beef, both imported and domestic, is popping up more and more on fine-dining menus. This exclusive grade of beef traditionally hails from Kobe, Japan, where the Wagyu cattle are pampered with sake massages and loads of beer to drink. Available in the United States now, American-style Kobe also comes from the Wagyu cattle, but the tradition of massage is not followed. Rather, the reason for well marbled, tastier meat is a combination of a superior breed of cattle and special attention placed on care and feed management. While

Kobe beef is high in fat, it's significantly lower in saturated fat and is free of both hormones and antibiotic residue.

Snake River Farms, based in Boise, Idaho, has trademarked its Kobe beef as "Butter Knife Beef" and claim a sweet, light, buttery flavor. "Nobody's been scared off by the high fat content, because the quality is so outstanding," says Jay Theiler, marketing director for Snake River. End users include Les Deux Gros in Glen Ellyn, Ill., Spago in Beverly Hills, Calif., and the Bellagio Casino's buffet line in Las Vegas, to name a few.

At Les Deux Gros, chef/co-owner Michael Lachowicz defends fat vehemently. "I use Kobe beef in a tournedo paired with braised beef short ribs. It's fall-apart tender. Both the Kobe tournedo and the short ribs coat the palate beautifully without being gummy. You're left with a clean beef flavor," he says. "If your method is strong and you fol-

low the process right, you extract the undesirable fat while maintaining the complexity of the good fat, which gives you that velvety mouthfeel."

Lachowicz says fat has never gone out of vogue. "It never went away. It just wasn't named on the menu. Thank goodness diners are realizing now that fat facilitates flavor," he says.

As part of a promotion at Strip House, Walzog added a Kobe-beef hamburger as a Wednesday night special for the (relatively) low price of \$20. "I use American Kobe because its ultra-rich, beefy flavor makes for a delicious hamburger," he says. The 10-ounce patty is marinated with sake, shallots, ground ginger and salt and pepper. It's broiled, then served on a brioche roll with pickled lotus and ginger french fries. "The response is great," says Walzog. The hamburger runs a 40% food cost.

**Advantage: less expensive cuts**



Kobe Beef exhibits a well marbled, higher fat content as seen with these boneless short ribs.

SNAKE RIVER FARMS



LYNN PARKS

At Timo, chef/co-owner Tim Andriola menus fattier meat dishes such as this braised lamb shank slow-cooked in tomato over creamy risotto.

At Timo, Andriola has loaded his menu with fattier, cheaper cuts of meat. By doing so, he maximizes flavor, keeps food cost low and menu prices down.

Timo serves an eclectic mix of Floridians—from Early Bird retirees to a late seating of young hipsters. “I’ve been happily surprised. I’ve put a few braises on the menu and they work. We’ve had a good reception. Slow cooking takes a lot of fat out and what you’re left with is rich meat,” says Andriola. “Care along the cooking process is the trick to using lower-end cuts of meat. You just need to develop its natural flavors,” he says.

One of his popular braises is a lamb shank slow-cooked in tomato over creamy risotto. He trims excess fat, then seasons the meat with salt and pepper. After it’s browned with olive oil, a dark caramelization develops. He then adds a brunoise of mirepoix, garlic, rosemary and crushed tomatoes, which gives the braise its liquid. He brings it to a boil, then roasts the shanks in the oven, turning them halfway. Once the shanks have cooked, the fat is skimmed off. Shanks are served with the juices. Andriola charges \$19 and runs a food cost of 20%.

Cindy Hutson, executive chef/owner of Ortanique, a “cuisine of the sun” concept with restaurants in Miami, Las Vegas and Washington D.C., braises pork shanks with star anise, lemon and orange peel. She charges \$29 and runs a food cost of 19%.

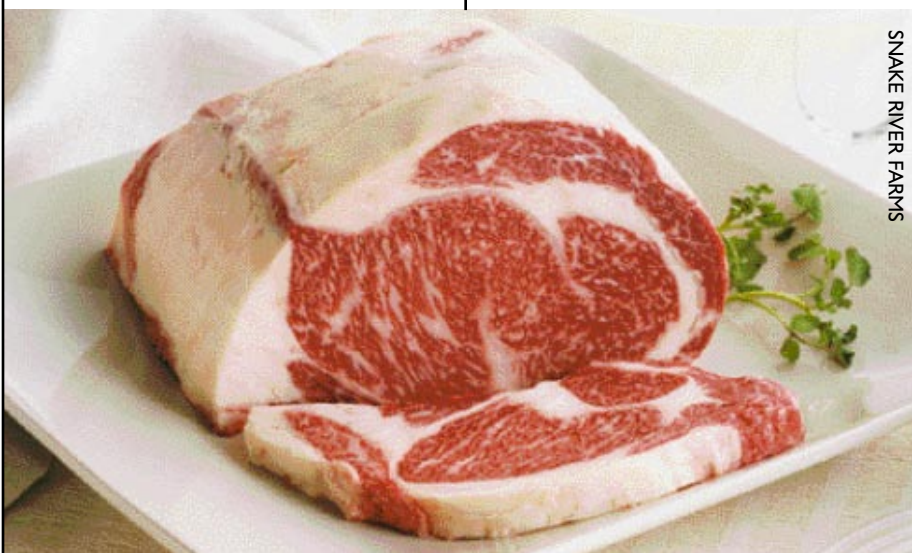
“I had a leaner style of cooking and tried to cut back on fat, but now I incorporate meats that are more marbled, and braised meats, too,” says Hutson.

#### The other red meat?

The campaign launched by the National Pork Board in 1987 that declared pork as “the other white meat” shot pork sales through the roof, positioning it as an alternative to chicken. Yet we’re now seeing a growth in demand for the return of

old-style pork—well marbled and pink.

Boutique producers—such as Snake River Farms; Oakland, Calif.-based Niman Ranch; and Geneva, Minn.-based Berkshire Pork—answer the complaint that modern pork, while lean, is also light in flavor. All produce fatter hogs that are fed no animal by-products or antibiotics. The hogs are penned outside for part of the year, which allows deeper muscle development with trickle-down fat. While industrial hogs are typically 230 pounds at slaughter, boutique hogs weigh in at 260 to 280 fatty pounds; industrial hogs run a fat back of  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch, while their chubbier counterparts boast a  $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch to  $1\frac{3}{4}$ -inch fat back.



SNAKE RIVER FARMS

Snake River Farms raises Wagyu cattle for its Kobe-style Ribeye Gold beef cut.

Of course, Boutique prices go along with boutique hogs, but chefs who utilize the fatter hogs claim to be in hog heaven.

At Ortanique, Hutson menus a double bone-in jerk pork chop served with a rum guava sauce and flambéed tropical fruits. “I use Berkshire Pork, and although my sauce is still there, you taste the pork first, which you don’t when you use commercial

pork,” says Hutson. “The flavor and juiciness are amazing. It’s one of the biggest sellers on my menu.” She charges \$28 for the 14-ounce pork chop and reports a 25% food cost.

She also serves a Sri Lankan-spiced pork tenderloin with pearl pasta, sweet-and-sour pineapple and a tomato-cilantro sauce. “The Berkshire tenderloin has more fat running through it, and that keeps the meat moister,” says Hutson.

#### Show us your belly

One of the most popular dishes at Blackbird is braised fresh bacon, crustied with garlic, coriander and cumin seed and served over whole roasted fingerling potatoes.

Kahan gets whole pork bellies from Niman Ranch. He cuts the bellies (which he says need to be two or three inches thick) into three equal portions, trims the fat cap and scores them deeply. He seasons them with salt and pepper and lets them rest for 30 minutes, then rubs the bellies with chopped garlic. He renders the fat, then braises with a light stock, fennel, carrot, celery, onion and fresh thyme, and deglazes with white wine. He cooks the bellies at 325°F for three hours, lets them cool in the broth for an hour, then transfers them to a sheet pan that cools in the walk-in. He reserves the broth for the sauce. Kahan then crisps the bellies to order in a black-steel pan on the stovetop.

## Larding Meats

Many lean cuts of meat can be made succulent and juicy by a classical technique called “larding.” A larding needle, which typically has a sharp, pointed tip and a hollow body, is used to “sew” fat into lean meats. A long, thin strip of the larding agent, such as pork fat or bacon is inserted into the tool’s cavity, and the needle is used to thread the fat through the meat.

### FILET DE BOEUF FARCI

chef Michael Lachowicz  
Les Deux Gros  
Glen Ellyn, Ill.

- 1 whole beef tenderloin (barrel or Chateaubriand cut only—head and tail removed)
- 1 pound foie gras
- Salt and pepper
- 15 slices thinly cut bacon
- Butcher’s twine

1) Mark tenderloin in three places equidistant from each other. Refrigerate filet. 2) With foie gras at room temperature, cut six  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-square strips and place on a plastic-wrap-lined cookie sheet. Chill thoroughly. When beef and foie gras are at same temperature, remove from refrigerator. Lightly season foie gras strips with salt and pepper. 3) Place foie gras strips one at a time in the larding needle and insert into pre-determined marks on meat. Insert two strips into each mark. Chill thoroughly. 4) Lay bacon flat, but overlapping, on a plastic-wrap-lined cookie sheet. Center beef tenderloin on bacon. Wrap tenderloin, using plastic wrap as your guide, then secure with butcher’s twine. 5) Sear tenderloin on all sides on high heat until bacon is lightly colored. Finish by roasting on a rack at 375°F for 8 minutes. Allow to rest 10 minutes before slicing. Remove string, slice and serve.

“It’s not as decadent as it sounds. A good portion of the fat is rendered out. The texture is wonderful and buttery,” says Kahan.

“It’s like going to your own pig roast.” ■

—by Katie Ayoub