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Food

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What's your beef?

Alternative cuts rival the most tender, popular steaks

BY TERESA TAYLOR
The Post and Courier

They're showing up on more restaurant menus, in butcher shops and even in a few supermarkets, some of the best steaks many people have never heard of.

Flatiron, hanger and chuck tender steaks are growing in popularity as more affordable alternatives to the big three: tenderloin, strip and rib-eye. Cooked and sliced properly, they're as tender or nearly so and may cost less than half per pound as the others.

Ted Dombrowski, owner of Ted's Butcherblock in downtown Charleston, sells all three cuts in his shop and says awareness is increasing.

"I think more chefs are out there trying to differentiate their plates, and also it goes back to seeing more of them on cooking shows and in magazines."

Also, he says, "The industry has become very efficient at breaking things down" - meaning butchering to make more use of the cow.

Earth Fare meat department manager Steven Butler says the store has been carrying flatiron and hanger off and on for more than a year. "You see them on menus, but a lot of people aren't familiar with them yet."

Flatiron, from the top blade area of the chuck, or shoulder of the cow, is truly a new cut. The steak was identified after a 2002 study on undervalued beef cuts by the University of Nebraska and the University of Florida.

Surprisingly, the study found flatirons to be the second most tender cut of meat from the steer after the tenderloin. Many compare its taste to a strip or loin.

Flatirons take well to marinades, Dombrowski says.

As relatively thin steaks, they should be cooked quickly and not too much.

"You don't want to go above medium because it will get tougher."

Butler agrees. "It's a real quick, thin steak. In under 10 minutes, dinner's ready."

Dombrowski says the steaks, shaped somewhat like antique flatirons, should be sliced against the grain after cooking for maximum tenderness.

Another up-and-coming steak few people know about is the chuck tender or terres major, Dombrowski says. "Even though it comes from the chuck, it's an isolated muscle" that makes it tender, he says.

It's long and tapered like a whole tenderloin, but much smaller, weighing roughly a half-pound. "This is a lot like a flank steak. It's gorgeous to cook whole and slice, it's a great steak for fajitas or any way you would use a flank steak."

Dombrowski thinks consumers will start seeing more of it.

"It's kind of like an affordable filet," he says.

Hanger steak, prized for its deep, beefy taste, often is called a "butcher's cut," says Dombrowski. "It's not very pretty but is very flavorful, so the butcher would save it for himself."

Historically, hanger steaks have been a French bistro standard called "onglet."

This cut comes from a 1- to 2-pound thick muscle on the underside of the cow that supports the diaphragm. It's the only asymmetrical cut of the cow, meaning there's only one per animal.

Dombrowski recommends pan searing hanger steak and finishing it in the oven or cooked on the grill. "It takes very well to a marinade, but it's not necessary," he adds.

Steaks have a short line of sinew in the middle that should be cut out after cooking. If cut out before cooking, the meat will fall apart, he says.

After that, tenderness should be a given, especially if the meat is cut across the grain.

These cuts are becoming more widely available. In addition to Ted's Butcherblock and Earth Fare, one or

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