

Steak MY DAY

How the city's newest steakhouses fit into an already crowded scene

By Lisa Arnett

When a trio of steakhouses opened their doors in River North this year, we couldn't help but ask: Why, oh why, do we need another steakhouse? From the wood-paneled walls and cigar smoke-laden past of classics such as Gene & Georgetti to more contemporary entries like David Burke's Primehouse to Brazilian steakhouses like Fogo de Chao slicing off unlimited portions, it seems like we have plenty of meat to go around.

But believe it or not, Chicago doesn't belong to the U.S. region that consumes the most steak. Out of the 887 million servings of steak Americans ate from Sept. 1, 2009 to Aug. 31, the Southern U.S.—which, yes, includes Texas—has us beat by 17 percent, according to market research company the NPD Group.

Statistics don't trump our long relationship with steak, though. "You go back to the days of the stockyards; there's always been an association of the Midwest with beef," says Eric Gandelone, director of food service research at Mintell, a global consumer and market research organization. Chicago being a major financial center also fuels steakhouses, seen not only as special-occasion spots but also as "the accepted place of business" for wining and dining clients, he says. And in a dining scene of cycling trends, the steakhouse is classic.

This year's crop of steakhouses have plenty in common. All three are owned by men. None of them does that elaborate at-the-table schpeal showcasing each cut of plastic-wrapped meat. They all serve USDA prime beef and each menu follows roughly the same traditional format: seafood-heavy appetizers, then steaks, plus huge family-style side dishes served a la carte. So what does set them apart? Read on for the beefy truth.



Benny's Chop House

444 N. Wabash Ave. 312-626-2444

Opened: April 1

Steak philosophy: Tons of choices. There are wet-aged, dry-aged, regular and bone-in cuts, plus all-natural USDA prime steaks. Sticking to just one kind of aging would be "like going into a cupcake shop and only offering chocolate," says director of operations Mitchell Schmieding. Natural steaks come from farm-raised cattle that eat not just grass but whatever greens are in season, from clover to alfalfa. "If [a cow] eats grasses once they're gray and dry, that's what it's going to taste like," he says.

Preparation: A dash of salt and pepper before hitting the grill for those tell-tale crisscross marks. The owners: Benny Siddu, owner of Italian restaurant Volare, and Vince Naccarato, once-owner of cookware company Wilton Enterprises.

Must-try steak: The all-natural file (\$34.99 for 7-ounce, \$42.99 for 10-ounce), which has more marbling (which, most say, equals more flavor) than its grain-fed counterparts. "We've had ... blind taste-testing with the staff, and hands down, natural has won every time," Schmieding says.

Most traditional steakhouse quality: Massive wine lockers

Least traditional qualities: The surprising lack of booths (only four in the whole place) and contemporary appetizers such as foie gras with forest mushrooms, crispy pork belly and huckleberries.

Biggest steak: 32-ounce porterhouse (\$79.99)

Did you know? Despite Benny's fancy vibe, there's no dress code. "More often than not we'll have guests walk in ... and say, 'Are we dressed OK to eat in here?'" Schmieding says. "You can come off the golf course; you can be in your Bears jersey; you can be in shorts."

Chicago Cut Steakhouse

300 N. La Salle St. 312-329-1800

Opened: Sept. 20

Steak philosophy: Steaks are dry-aged on-site for 35 to 40 days. Beef is raised by four ranchers in Nebraska and Kansas who specialize in cattle for dry-aging, a process that removes water from the meat to intensify the flavor. "You have an essence of earthiness or nuttiness to the steak," says co-owner David Flom. "Traditionally dry-aging is something that came from Europe and a lot of the New York steakhouses."

Preparation: Seasoned with sea salt and fresh-ground black pepper and caramelized to a golden-brown crust on a 1,800-degree charbroiler.

The owners: David Flom opened Rosebud Steakhouse with owner Alex Dana and also served as wine buyer for the Rosebud group; Matt Moore served as beverage director at Smith & Wollensky before moving on to work at Rosebud Steakhouse and Rosebud Prime.

Must-try steak: The 24-ounce bone-in filet mignon (\$51), aka the "Chicago cut," the restaurant's namesake. "We actually shave the bone so the marrow is exposed, and then once the meat starts cooking, the cook will go in and actually brush the marrow on top of the meat to enhance the flavor."

Most traditional steakhouse quality: Myriad wine options

Least traditional qualities: Floor-to-ceiling windows flooding the whole place with sunshine and wine lists distributed via iPads

Biggest steak: 55-ounce double-cut bone-in ribsteak (\$90)

Did you know? Chicago Cut's butcher-style steak knives are custom-made in Germany and feature a straight edge to slice through the meat rather than the traditional serrated edge, which actually tears the meat, bleeding out some of the flavor, Flom says.

A VERY MEATY HISTORY

Plotting the openings of a few standout Chicago steakhouses

May 1941
Gene & Georgetti

December 1978
Morton's The Steakhouse
(Gold Coast)



November 1986
The Chicago Chop House

October 1987
Harry Caray's Italian
Steakhouse

May 1989
Gibsons Bar &
Steakhouse

August 1996
Tango Sur



ALL ABOUT AGING

Aging allows time for enzymes to break down, resulting in more tender meat. But there are two schools of thought:

when it comes to how to do it: **Wet-aged:** Meat is vacuum-sealed in its own juices to retain moisture.

Dry-aged: Meat is hung in a cooler to evaporate moisture from the muscle and concentrate flavor.



Bone-in ribeye at Chicago Cut Steakhouse
LENNY GILMORE / REDEYE

Mastro's Steakhouse

520 N. Dearborn St. 312-521-5100

Opened: Oct. 22. This is the sixth Mastro's Steakhouse, with other locations in Arizona and Southern California.

Steak philosophy: Steaks are wet-aged for 28 days. Just as important as the meat is Mastro's supper-club slant featuring nightly live music (think musicians crooning everything from Sinatra to Sting). Mastro's President and CEO Tom Heymann doesn't consider the experience complete without both. "To hear just 'That was the best steak I ever had' without hearing 'I had so much fun,' you know what, that would be a missing element to me," he says.

Preparation: Seasoned with a "secret" rub before hitting the 1,800-degree Montague broiler, steaks are served on a 400-degree sizzling plate with a touch of butter and parsley.

The owners: Heymann formed Levy Restaurants with Mark and Larry Levy in the late '70s. In 2007, he acquired Mastro's from the founding family of the same name with business partner Mark Levy.

Must-try steak: Bone-in filet (\$43 for 12-ounce, \$49 for 18-ounce)

Most traditional steakhouse quality: Sending customers home with leftovers. You may have spotted Mastro's trademark shopping bags on "Entourage."

Least traditional qualities: Martinis garnished with dry ice for a dramatic smoky effect, and a bar that's less waiting area and more the center of the action, thanks to the live music. Two separate dining rooms are available for quieter meals.

Biggest steak: 48-ounce double-cut porterhouse (\$86)

Did you know? Heymann grew up next door to Morton's founder Arnold Morton and his family.

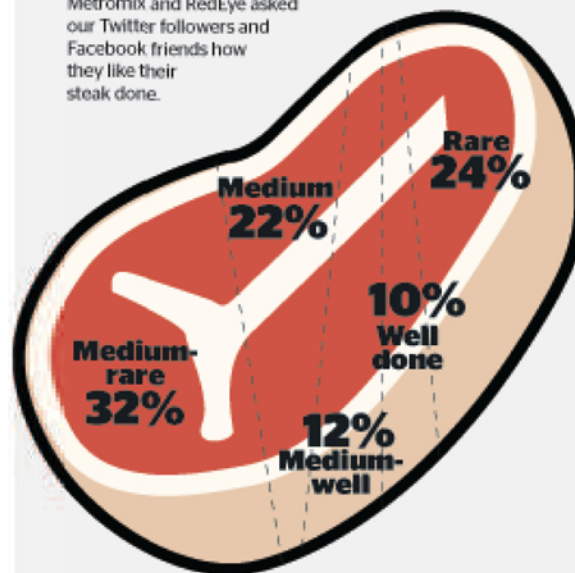
LISA ANNETT IS THE METROMIX DINING PRODUCER. SHE ALWAYS ORDERS HER STEAK MEDIUM-RARE. LANNETT@TRIBUNE.COM



Tomahawk Steak at Mastro's Steakhouse
DAN PETERSON / REDEYE

How do you like your steak?

Metromix and RedEye asked our Twitter followers and Facebook friends how they like their steak done.



"Rare at any notable establishment. Proves the quality of the meat and chef."

—@TYLINER

"Medium rare! There has to be just a little pink for the full flavor and texture of a good steak!"

—@NNS5

"Medium. Anything more should be considered criminal."

—@CHICAGOPHOTOSHO

COMPILED BY SCOTT KLEINBERG

March 1998

Carmichael's Chicago Steak House

May 1999

Shula's Steak House



November 2000

Rosebud Steakhouse

August 2002

Fogo de Chao



February 2005

Morton's The Steakhouse (Loop)

March 2006

David Burke's Primehouse

» See our extended timeline on metromix.com.

—LINDA HAYS