

Beef?

Oliver says that beef is where wine was in the 1970s. Back then, you had your choice of red or white, jug wine or fine wine. Today, you can wax eloquent about terroir, grape varietals, vineyards, viticultural practices, and so on. Same with coffee: In the 1980s, there was regular and decaf, instant or Colombian. Today you've got fair trade, organic, single estate varieties, and brewing choices galore.

During our blind taste test, the group each sampled three grilled rib eyes, cooked rare with nothing but salt. They came from different ranches and varying breeds. Their diets varied too. The tasters approached their tasks seriously. Brows furrowed and marking sheets were judiciously filled out. To me, the first beef—code named “Y”—tasted like roasted potato. It had a buttery soft chew (the mouth feel is, according to Oliver, a result of the cattle's terroir, diet and treatment) and a reserved flavour profile. Reminiscent of a higher-end North American steak house.

The “B” beef tasted of vegetables and corn. It had a direct flavour profile and a nice bite. Some described it as a bit gamey. Beef “D” proudly shouted out South American-style to me. The kind of beef my dad would have given his left hand for if he could only have found it in Canada. His constant lament was that Canadian beef lacked real flavour. “D” was full-throttle, amped-up bovine with a spinach-like undertone that Mark Cutrara and the others described as tasting somewhat of “dried bonito flakes.”

Here's the skinny: “Y” was a Holstein-Friesian cross from 3 Brand Cattle Company in Southern California, wet-aged for 21 days, grass- and grain-fed. For Deming and Crystal Mo—a Shanghai-based food writer who grew up in the US—this was the best-tasting beef. Deming added: “It was straight-ahead beef flavour, nice and pleasant. It didn't taste like feet!” And that, according to Oliver, is the beauty of these tastings. “Everyone finds something different in the meat,” she says, “and when they know what they like, they can begin to choose what's right for them.”

“B” was a 100-percent Black Angus steak from Grass Range in Montana. It was grass-fed, grain-finished and dry-aged for 14 days. The big flavoured “D” was also a 100-percent Black Angus, but exclusively grass-fed and dry-aged for 28 days. The good news for Argentinean steak fans is that this meat is from Brantford's own Dingo Farms—Cutrara's steak of choice for the menu at Cowbell! Dad would approve.

Did You Know?
Beef that's been exercised is likely more flavourful.

BEEFY MISCONCEPTIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

GRASS-ONLY BEEF

Guess what? All cattle are grass-fed and most are finished on a diet of grasses and grains. If pure grass-fed is important to you, ask the purveyor to confirm it was raised solely on grass its whole life. Expect a flavour profile that's more adventurous and complex.

WET- VS. DRY-AGED

Both techniques boost flavour and increase tenderness. Wet-aged beef is vac-packed and so doesn't lose moisture. Dry aging is considered superior, if challenging: the beef is hung in cold rooms just slightly above freezing. The meat dries, shrinks and is covered in a mould “coat” that is cut off before it reaches the consumer—that's where the flavour comes from.

After a quick palate cleanser, the group tried four more steaks. A wet-aged, grain-fed Wagyu (50% Wagyu/50% Angus) came from Oregon's Select Kobe Beef American Ranchers. We had a Charolais from Elliott & Ferris Family Ranches in Colorado, finished on corn, hay and silage. An alfalfa- and grain-fed Charolais-Angus came from George Miller in Haldimand County, Ontario. Finally, Cutrara proffered a tri-tip cut from Ontario's Dingo Farms. The Charolais from Elliott & Ferris and the Charolais-Angus from George Miller were my favourites, and my preferences coincided with Bangerter, Cutrara and Oliver. We liked the firm mouth-feel—both were dry-aged—and their multidimensional, full-flavoured personalities.

Two other key points stood out for us. First, it's not all about the steak's marbling or grade. My favourites weren't necessarily heavily marbled, but they packed the most flavour. More importantly, we became aware that beef that is stressed doesn't taste good. Once an animal's adrenalin shoots through the roof, the texture and flavour of the meat changes.

This all relates back to Oliver's original challenge: Can one little taste test change the world (of beef at least)? If you're into artisan wine, cheese, or heritage pork, and knowing what's on your plate—then the answer is yes. Time to take the challenge.

To attend one of Carrie Oliver's beef tasting series in the GTA, go to oliverranch.com.

OLIVER'S TASTE PANEL OF “STEAK WHISPERERS” HELPED HER COME UP WITH SOME OF THE FOLLOWING TASTING NOTES:

FLAVOUR NOTES INCLUDE: Roquefort, maple syrup, mushroom, metallic, grassy and lamby.

CHARACTER NOTES: Complex, listless, unbalanced.

MOUTHFEEL: Oily, crispy, dry, like sawdust.