

Born Again Carnivore

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A guide to aesthetics, ethics, and the importance of a good butcher

Maybe it's lovable serial killers, like Dexter, who have revived the world's obsession with meat. Or perhaps it's the butcher himself who's put a fresh face on the dirty apron-wearing, cleaver-wielding cliché. Whatever the reason — we're back on board. And the new meat is different: it's stylish and ethical. It has character and is socially inclined. From degustation fiends to food junkies — everyone's talking meat.

"Local sourcing," "Certified organic" and "Pesticide-free" are the mantras that accompany the modern shopper to the farmers market. She leaves with her arms filled with naturally wild Portobello mushrooms, Chateau de Bourgogne triple-crème brie, fresh-picked rosemary, and hand-shaped pasta (from wine flour) for her evening dinner. With a shopping list this glamorous in its simplicity, it's only natural that meat follows the well-tread path of other artisanal foodstuffs.

The Look:

Food and style have crossed paths often throughout time, and since the day that the fashionable elite first recognized the pleasure and social gratification that accompanies dining, fine food and high society have been frequently spotted in similar circles. Today, we still pay tribute to the eating ritual by carefully controlling our dining conditions: from the exquisite plating of food, to the lighting of a room, to the very way we dress for the occasion. We do all this to enhance the experience of eating and heighten the ambience of our surroundings...perhaps even to impress our company.

And meat is not exempt from this aesthetic ritual: the new butcher shop could rival a Louis Vuitton boutique or an exclusive gentleman's club. The timeless look of authentic French butcheries served as the inspiration for Victor Churchill, the new concept meat shop in the Australian municipality of Woollahra (located in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney). Having achieved success as the leading meat supplier to some of Australia, China and Singapore's most highly regarded restaurants, the father and son duo, Vic and Anthony Puharich, have gone on to pioneer what they call "a new concept in the old tradition of butchering."

Floor-to-ceiling glass shelves line one wall. Inside, the mirrored casing is lit dramatically from above, showcasing mouth-watering options like aged marbled scotch beef and free-range spatchcock. And like a fashion boutique, they advise their salivating clientele to ask for service if interested in anything behind the glass. On another wall, a custom designed cog-gear and metal chain rack parades specialty cuts of meat and carcasses in a slow rotation, as awestruck customers watch. The contraption is backed by a Himalayan rock salt brick wall, which infuses the hanging meat with flavour and sterilizes the air.

The vision for this unique meat shop was realized by design firm Dreamtime Australia Design — internationally renowned for their work on luxury hotels, restaurants and bars. Director Michael McCann recounts his intrigue with their first retail project. "The brief was to create a truly unique butcher shop that successfully blended a traditional European butchery in look and feel with modern, cutting-edge design elements and features that had the potential to redefine the category," he adds, "not only in Australia but worldwide."

The global view on meat is being redefined, and with their brief successfully met, Victor Churchill leads as a top example of a highly stylized balance behind the modern traditional butchery. However, high style and aesthetic is only one aspect of the new meat, and let's be honest, when you're through gawking at the enormous carcasses, who's going to help you decipher your agneau from your emu?

The Butcher:



Since the prehistoric days when men had to hunt down animals with their bare hands, meat has come a long way. Today, it's heading up a far more civilized, attractive return to the stage and, as a consequence, women are increasingly asserting themselves at the butcher shop. Meat shopping can be dramatically enhanced by knowing things like: how to buy, who to talk to, what to ask for, and where to go. Luckily, the new meat is accompanied by the era of the handsome butcher, and he's ready, willing and able to answer all of your meatiest questions.

A good place to start is with an anatomy lesson. Understanding the "where's where" and "what's what" of an animal will be invaluable in searching out good buys, quality cuts, food pairings, recipes, portion sizes, as well as understanding what you like. Many butchers have some type of sign posted that will illuminate these concepts; however, asking questions of the man himself will be sure to offer deeper insight.

If anatomy is a bit basic for you, you might consider discussing options for healthy choices. Your butcher can advise you on leaner cuts — like beef or pork tenderloin, or you could venture into the world of game meats. You may even inquire about lessons in butchering — though definitely not recommended for the faint of heart. When you're savvy enough to know your way around the shop, you could consider asking your butcher to source special products for you. By the time he knows your name, he may even accept phoned-in/e-mailed/Facebook messaged holds on meat or provide you with unique and spectacular recipes from his own vault. The key — as with any new pairing — is to find a good fit then nurture the relationship.

Jamie Kennedy, respected Toronto restaurateur and spokesperson for a thriving foodie scene, agrees, explaining, "Especially now, in the city, we're seeing many more small scale, neighbourhood butchers popping up. As we get to know our local growers of heritage breeds of animals, the butcher shop is becoming multi-faceted and service oriented." He adds that it's "infinitely more interesting than buying meat in a supermarket on a Styrofoam and plastic wrapped tray."

Kennedy is known for his legendary commitment to environmental issues as well as his support for organic agriculture, local producers and traditional methods, though he's not convinced that the local butcher will overtake the entire market: "In certain circles this is the case, [but] I believe that if we are talking about the mainstream, most purchasers still go to the supermarket and buy industrially produced meats." Reflectively, he adds, "For those who are involved in the local food movement, we realize that there is much education required to make people aware, in a general sense, of the pitfalls of supporting industrial production of food, compared to the benefits of supporting small scale, local production of food."

As with all artisanal and local produce, the market's support is crucial for their survival and Kennedy points out, "I think that purchasing meat these days can be an exercise in supporting a local grower in a sustainable and qualitative way."

Peter Sanagan of Toronto's Kensington Market butcher shop, Sanagan's Meat Locker, is both a friend to the local grower and the face of the new local butcher. He's young, he's energetic. He does television spots and keeps a photo blog of recipes he makes at home. And all his customers say his meat is to die for. Sanagan's Meat Locker is a great little butchery: it has mouth-watering cuts of meat in the window and sawdust on the floor. It's also clean, bright and has an unusual vintage charm about it. Part of that is thanks to Sanagan himself. In looks, he might be a university student you'd expect to see at the library studying for a literature final, or perhaps a lost member of the band Sloan. On the other hand, the white apron seems natural too. But, within one conversation, his obvious credibility and expertise redefine your impression and you know you're dealing with a guy who's serious about what he does.

Sanagan embodies everything you want to have in a personal butcher, including a quirky sense of humour evident in his Twitter updates ("What are you doing Friday? Well don't do that and come get organic chickens instead," "Oh Berkshire pig, how do I love to cut thee? Let me count the ways. [Elizabeth Barrett Browning]").

Unlike many of the other trendy vanguard butcheries, Sanagan's doesn't deal exclusively in organics — the focus is more on ethical sourcing (beneficial to both one's wallet and one's conscience). Sanagan adds, "[We] sell meat from smaller farms in Ontario. I try to maintain a personal relationship with my farmers," he add, "in fact I plan to close the store once a month so that my staff and I can visit some of the farms we buy from and make sure we create close contact with the source."

The butcher, in this sense, plays the real role of the middleman and Sanagan agrees. "I feel this is important because most people don't have the time to talk to farmers themselves. They need someone they can trust guiding them into making the best decisions."

Sanagan also explains that education is about more than knowing what will work in a recipe: "Consumers should always be offered the choice when deciding what to put in their bodies. Unfortunately we have gone the way of the mega-supermarkets in the last 40 years, and it has become very difficult to source interesting, local and smaller farmed products. Being able to talk to your butcher and explain exactly what you want shouldn't be a luxury; everyone should be able to communicate with the people who prepare their food."

Supporting local is just half the story though. It's also important to understand the specialty offerings of other regions in worldwide locales. If you can get a handle on this, you can take both eating and entertaining with meat to another level. For example, in Tuscany, huge cuts of tender, succulent Chianina beef come from the massive white oxen raised in the Val di Chiana, near Arezzo. Jamie Kennedy reminisces about a recent meal at the Tuscan restaurant Solo Ciccia run by Dario, the famous butcher from Panzano in Chianti, recounting, "[Solo Ciccia] means 'only meat.' Being a butcher, [Dario] decided to open a restaurant that featured the dishes he remembered having as a child when



his father, also a butcher, would bring home the more esoteric cuts that nobody wanted to purchase from the shop. When one dines there, one has no choice but to accept as dinner: six courses of beef, prepared from different cuts in different ways. There is the odd raw vegetable offered as a “contorno” to the meat mainstage.” He adds, “Of course, the Chianti is flowing and excellent, as is the olive oil and saltless Tuscan bread.” Exploring international specialties and treatments of meat is an exercise in sheer pleasure — whether experienced at home or, if you’re lucky, in situ.

Every woman should have a good butcher to teach her the tricks of the meat market. Embracing the ins and outs of this ingredient through experimentation and conversations with your butcher will reveal its diverse and delicious nature.

Interestingly, however, meat isn’t all about stylish dinner parties, romantic locations and sexy butchers. It also happens to be one of the most controversial issues in the food world and has divided many friends, couples and work associates in pursuit of a friendlier, healthier option. Thankfully, the new meat offers some potential for reconciliation.

The Dilemma:

In recent years, the ancient observance of vegetarianism has gripped the imagination of mainstream society. Teenage girls and models, celebs and soccer mums all jumped on board thanks to the dual benefits of defending animals’ welfare combined with the possibility of shedding a few pounds. The situation was a win-win and the notion of vegetarianism became well-loved and widespread. Today, the trend is so entrenched that everything from the corner variety store to the dingiest truck-stop menu boast vegetarian options in big bold type. And just as vegetarian food finally became as accessible as any other, the news hit the streets: meat is back.

Confronted once again with the omnivore’s dilemma, our shopping lists suddenly dared to remind us to buy ‘Rack of organic lamb’ and ‘Double smoked bacon.’ Our dusty non-vegetarian recipe books lay open to ‘Osso Bucco.’ We remembered days past, when we would purchase nearly unrecognizable meat products from a sea of Styrofoam and plastic without a backward glance. Sure we knew it was steak, but what was steak really?

Completely disconnected from our food, it seemed grotesque to ask too many questions or know too much about what went on behind the scenes. Many of us preferred to pretend the origins of our beef were as innocuous and inoffensive as that of our mass-produced mushrooms. So why and how did we manage such a dramatic departure from our well-intended veggie vow? It’s simple, before the days of socially appropriate vegetarianism we ate meat for a reason. And while some of us evolved to function without it, the rest of us still required it to be healthy. Peter Sanagan notes, “Many ex-vegetarians are telling me they feel their bodies crave meat, but they want to be able to make ethical choices about the animals they are eating.”

Today, the new meat has offered us this third option — the ability to support a conscientious, ethical movement that’s considerate of animals, while preventing rampant malnutrition and iron deficiencies.

Strangely, in the entire history of civilization, only since the 20th century were synthetic chemicals introduced to the food supply. Despite this, the production of organic foods today is treated with the reverence of a new technology and has become a heavily regulated industry with concerns about the “promotion of ecological balance” and the “conservation of biodiversity.” More obviously, these organizations patrol considerations regarding production standards, handling and standardized labeling. In reality, all that this means is that we’re attempting to return to our organic roots.

The new carnivore demands to be well-informed about the source of their groceries. “People want transparency with their food,” says Sanagan, adding, “In general, people in the city have more disposable income than before — fewer kids, higher paying jobs — and they want to spend it. But they want to know what they are spending it on. Everyone wants to be responsible with their expenditures and this leads to wanting to know how their food was grown and raised.”

Organic, free-range, grain/grass/whey-fed, sustainable, antibiotic and hormone-free — these are some of the slew of labels that help to inform us of the animal’s origins and treatment. The authors of the diet book *Skinny Bitch*, who promote a strict brand of veganism, describe the fear and anger that mistreated animals experience, pointing out that this negative energy is what we take into our bodies when we consume them. It is no wonder that the modern consumer wants assurance that our meat comes from animals who have lived full, happy lives in as natural an environment as possible, removed from the cruelties that are often necessities of mass-production.

The Status:

Today, a bolder more responsible consumer has emerged; toughened by her experience with hand-tended produce, she’s ready to take on meat. A more educated approach means that the consumer actually recognizes the animals who gave their lives to feed us. This is a more reverential form of consumption and very tribal in its roots. Native Americans approached the act of eating in a similar way: they would kill an animal for food and offer a prayer to the animal’s spirit for dying in order that they could live, thus honouring its sacrifice.

It seems that the compassion surrounding the recent vegetarian movement has in turn been carried through to the new breed of ethical carnivore. We can now take all that we’ve learned about how to best enjoy and reap nutritional value from vegetables and add the complexity of pairing it with meat that offers similar values. Jamie Kennedy observes that eating meat is an exercise in moderation and warns the consumer to maintain balance in their diets. “It is important not to eat too much of any food group. When it comes to meat, except perhaps on special feast occasions... It is better generally to tip the scale in favour of leafy green vegetables done up in interesting ways.” He adds, “I think striving for balance in the foods we eat is more to the point of what people are discovering today.” As a bonus, this practice allows us to maintain good relations with our vegetarian friends, who choose to remain meatless.

I was a vegan for eight years and a vegetarian for ten, but today the sight of a beautifully marbled piece of prime rib is enough to make me breathe a little more heavily. I am one of many women who have come around to the new face of meat and we believe in the enjoyment of high quality food through hands-on ethics. This about-face reflects the countenance of the new carnivore: she does not shy away from the vulgarity of what she eats, but ensures that her notion of "civilization" extends to that which is well beyond her dinner table.

Victor Churchill www.victorchurchill.com.au

Jamie Kennedy's Restaurants and Info www.jamiekennedy.ca

Sanagan's Meat Locker www.sanagansmeatlocker.com

Shop specialties include: organic pork, Berkshire pork (specialty breed from England), whey-fed pork, grass-finished beef (in summer only), heritage breeds of chicken, wild game (elk, bison, venison, quail, duck), plus our own sausages.

Top Ten specialty sausages: Cheeseburger, Sauerkraut/Dijon, Apple/Mint, Toasted Fennel/Chili/Garlic, Maple Syrup/Chinese Five Spice, Lamb Merguez, Lamb/Pork with Olives and Sundried Tomatoes, Lamb with Rosemary/Garlic, Wild Boar with Pistachios, Berkshire and Red Wine.



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