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Prime Time for Steak Lovers

By [KATY MCLAUGHLIN](#)

For years, Brian Wong, a 25-year-old technology consultant in San Jose, Calif., longed to buy USDA prime beef. He had tried it at an expensive steakhouse, but whenever he looked in supermarkets or at Costco for the beef with the Department of Agriculture's highest grading, he was told they didn't carry it.

So when Mr. Wong saw a cut labeled USDA prime at Costco—selling for \$9.99 a pound—he was so startled that he knocked on the window of the butcher department. “I asked them, ‘Is this a joke? Is it really prime?’ ” Mr. Wong says. The rib eyes he bought were the real thing: They were “more tender, more juicy” and more “delicious” than any other steaks he has cooked, Mr. Wong says.

Mr. Wong experienced a phenomenon steak lovers are observing across the country: High-end beef that was once available mostly at steak houses and fine-dining restaurants is increasingly showing up in retail butcher cases. Two years ago, the only way most home cooks could get their hands on beef varieties such as USDA prime was to buy them in a gourmet store or by mail order, which could be as expensive as a steak-house dinner. But now, not only is steak-house-quality beef easier to find; in many cases, it is selling for little more than standard supermarket meat.

The cause: a severe contraction in steak-house dining. Many top steak houses specialize in serving beef that's ranked USDA prime, a grading given to between 1% and 3% of the country's beef that designates the meat with the most marbling—the tendrils of fat running through meat that enhance its flavor and texture. As steak houses expanded over the past decade, they and other high-end restaurants bought nearly all the prime beef available. Amid growing competition in the past few years, many restaurants branched out into serving other specialty steaks, including Wagyu, from the breed of cattle used for Japan's highly marbled Kobe beef, grass-fed beef, which has a reputation for being healthier, and brand names such as Niman Ranch.

But this year, high-end steak houses, which depend largely on expense-account dining, have suffered single- and double-digit declines in same-store sales, according to restaurant consultant Technomic. So restaurants are buying a lot less fancy beef, leaving more of it for home cooks.

Two weekends ago, Ray Juskiewicz was at Seattle's Metropolitan Market when a special caught his eye: Snake River Farm's Wagyu beef, on sale for \$14.99 a pound. That struck Mr. Juskiewicz, a 47-year-old computer hardware salesman and avid weekend cook, as quite a deal: The only other time he had bought Wagyu beef, he had paid more than \$40 a pound. He bought the steaks, seasoned them with coarse salt and black pepper, and grilled them over high heat.

“They were amazing. Very juicy, with a very buttery flavor to them, incredibly tender. You didn't really need a steak knife,” says Mr. Juskiewicz. Though he usually finishes a steak with a pat of compound butter, which has herbs or other ingredients mixed in, he didn't garnish the Wagyu, preferring to let its flavor stand alone, he says.

Other people cooking extremely marbled beef would do well to follow Mr. Juskiewicz's approach, says Steven Raichlen, host of public television's Primal Grill and author of "The Barbecue Bible." Such meat needs little adornment: just a sprinkling of coarse salt and freshly ground, coarse black pepper and quick cooking on a hot grill.

By contrast, grass-fed meat, which comes from cattle that haven't been fattened on grain towards the end of their lives, rarely earns the prime grade because it tends to be less marbled. But it can have a more complex flavor, with herbal notes that reflect the grass diet, and it is also healthier than corn-fed beef, with more omega-3 fatty acids and less saturated fat. This meat benefits from a sprinkling of melted butter or olive oil. For the ultimate garnish, Mr. Raichlen recommends making a cup of aluminum foil, filling it with a piece of beef fat, and placing it over a cooler part of the grill until it melts. Pour a little liquid fat over a cooked steak for a beefy enhancement, he recommends.

Given a choice between cuts of USDA prime beef, Mr. Raichlen says he would choose a New York strip or a T-bone in order to take advantage of the firm meat, which tastes lush and juicy when well-marbled. But take a page from top steak houses and don't bother buying prime tenderloin, or filet mignon. This cut is only slightly marbled, so buying prime barely changes the eating experience.

Rib eyes, which are very rich, can be too fatty when they come from Wagyu beef, but they are the perfect choice for grass-fed beef, Mr. Raichlen says. The best way to showcase the concentrated, beefy quality created by dry-aging is to choose a T-bone or porterhouse. These cuts include a piece of filet, which becomes more flavorful through the dry-aging process.

Other factors have contributed to the wealth of fancy beef at stores today. For one thing, specialty ranches expanded their herd sizes during the steak-house boom. Three years ago, Snake River Farms in Boise, Idaho, decided to enlarge its herd of 7,000 cattle. Back then, more than 90% of Snake River's Wagyu beef was sold to restaurants. Today, the herd is 10,000 strong, and retail stores account for a third of sales.

Niman Ranch beef was one of the first ingredients to be identified by the name of the rancher or farmer on top restaurant menus in the 1990s. Its cachet derived from the beef's taste and the company's humane ranching methods, as well as the product's rarity at the time. Two years ago, the company expanded its herd size fourfold, says executive vice president Jeff Tripician. Now the beef is in "thousands of retail stores," Mr. Tripician says.

Whole Foods Market Inc. has been able to lower the price of its beef because home cooks looking to save money have started buying more ground beef, roasts and other cuts from various parts of the cow, says Theo Weening, head of meat purchasing for Whole Foods. That enables the company to buy more whole animals, allowing it to sell all the parts for a lower price, he says. In the Rocky Mountain region, Whole Foods recently had a sale on grass-fed ground beef for \$3.99 a pound, Mr. Weening says. He also says the store has sold New York strip steak for \$8.99 and \$9.99 a pound in recent months, about \$5 per pound cheaper than normal for the store's standard beef.





Indeed, across the spectrum of beef varieties and grades, prices for "steak-house cuts" such as tenderloin, porterhouse and rib eyes are down by 3% to 12%, depending on the cut, from last year, according to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. [Wal-Mart](#), under the Genuine Steakhouse label it rolled out to all stores last April, is selling USDA choice-grade meat. Prior to Genuine Steakhouse, Wal-Mart sold mostly select-grade meat, a less marbled variety.

Food aficionados around the country have been buzzing online about steak-house beef at retail. Frank Deis, a 64-year-old biochemistry professor in Highland Park, N.J., found it "terribly frustrating" to hear from his friends in wine-appreciation discussion groups that they were finding USDA prime beef at Costco when he couldn't. He dropped notes in the Costco suggestion box asking for the meat and complained to the store's butchers. Then, one day in December, Mr. Deis found prime beef—at \$8.99 a pound.

“At that price, why should I buy anything else?” says Mr. Deis, who puts his biochemistry background to use by aging whole loins of beef. He cuts it into steaks, grills it to rare, and serves it with a selection from his 1,000-bottle wine cellar.

“Man, oh man, it couldn’t be any tenderer” he says. “You chew it with your tongue.”

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RESTAURANT	DEAL	CAVEAT	THE BEEF	COMMENT
 Morton's the Steakhouse	Dinner of filet mignon and scallops, shrimp or crab cakes, a generous portion of a side dish and dessert for \$49.99 in most markets and \$54.50 in a few.	Diners won't see this on the menu; instead, they should mention the deal to a server and they will receive the offer, which runs through September 30th.	USDA prime beef, wet-aged for three to four weeks.	\$39 more buys a bottle of selected wine; for \$8 the steak can be upgraded to rib eye or New York strip.
 Ruth's Chris	One \$39.95 menu includes a six-ounce filet and shrimp entrée, among other choices, plus a starter, side and dessert.	Steakhouses often put filet on special menus because it is popular and also because it is easiest to slice into smaller portions.	USDA prime, wet-aged for between 24 and 28 days.	The restaurant offers another menu, for \$49.95, which includes a bigger filet or a 16-ounce strip steak. Both offers run until September 13th.
 The Palm	A summer lobster dinner includes a four-pound lobster for two, salads and a side for \$89.95.	Not on the menu—diners should mention it to the server to get the deal.	USDA prime beef, wet-aged, except at one branch in New York City (the one at 837 Second Avenue) where the beef is dry-aged.	Starting this month, the Palm is testing a bar menu in some locations featuring beef sliders, mini crab cakes, and filet mignon sandwiches for \$3.50 each.
 The Capital Grille	Starting this week, diners can pay an extra \$10 at lunch or \$25 at dinner and receive tasting portions of 11 or 12 selections by the chain's Master Sommelier.	Offer goes from July 13th to August 23rd.	Beef is either USDA prime or the more marbled end of USDA choice. Steaks are dry-aged in the restaurant for 14 days.	George Miliotes is Master Sommelier, a designation held by 176 people world-wide that represents having passed rigorous wine and spirits exams.

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