



Grade-A chefs stake a claim

Every celeb chef/restaurateur/vintner worth his (seasoned) salt seems to have opened a designer steakhouse to complement his flagship restaurant in recent years. Some of the big-name players (with their flagships in parentheses) include:

Michael Mina

David Burke

(Michael Mina's)

(davidburke & donatella)

StripSteak, Las Vegas

Primehouse, Chicago

Bradley Ogden

Jeffrey Chodorow

(Lark Creek Inn)

(China Grill)

Lark Creek Steak, San Francisco

Kobe Club, New York

Charlie Palmer

Tom Colicchio

(Aureole)

(Craft)

Charlie Palmer Steak,

Craftsteak,

Las Vegas, Reno and

New York and Las Vegas

Washington, D.C.

Bobby Flay

Wolfgang Puck

(Mesa Grill)

(Spago)

Bobby Flay Steak, Atlantic City

Cut, Beverly Hills, Calif.

Emeril Lagasse

Kevin Rathbun

(Emeril's)

(Rathbun's)

Delmonico Steakhouse,

Kevin Rathbun Steak, Atlanta

Las Vegas

Leslie Rudd

Michael Lomonaco

(Rudd Vineyards, Dean & DeLuca)

(formerly Windows on the World)

Press, St. Helena, Calif.

Porter House, New York

Kerry Simon

(Simon Kitchen & Bar)

Simon L.A., Los Angeles

Joachim Splichal

(Patina)

Nick & Stef's Steakhouse,

Los Angeles and New York

Alan Stillman

(Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group)

Quality Meats, New York

Laurent Tourondel

(BLT Restaurants)

BLT Prime, New York; and

BLT Steak, New York, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C.

Rick Tramonto

(Tru)

Tramonto's Steak & Seafood, Wheeling, Ill.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten

(Jean Georges)

Prime, Las Vegas

Prime time: Star chefs claim stake in fancy side of steakhouses

By Jerry Shriver, USA TODAY

BEVERLY HILLS — Looks like a high-toned girl's night out is underway as a pretty party of four settles into custom-designed chairs in one of the city's most chic restaurants and is bathed in the fading sunlight filtering through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Their chatter about honeymoons mingles with menu navigation: A glass of New Zealand Pinot Noir to start, or that cocktail with the pomegranate foam? An appetizer salad made with organic baby beets from a local boutique farm, or perhaps the — yikes! \$22! — tuna tartare with wasabi aioli and Tosa soy? Sides of potato *tarte tatin*? Will that leave room for the heirloom apple-huckleberry crumble?

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As for their entrees, well, that's practically a given: This is a steakhouse. Wolfgang Puck's year-old Cut steakhouse in the Beverly Wilshire hotel. So the ladies will be having USDA Prime sirloins, dry-aged for 35 days, or \$17-an-ounce Wagyu ribeyes from Kobe, Japan (perhaps with \$2 Argentinean *chimichurri* sauce on the side). Then they'll slice them with steel knives forged in Germany and watch the juices run.

Cowboys and cave-dwellers may cringe, but Cut represents the fancy new face of the all-American chop house. Across the country, celeb chefs and restaurateurs are standing a century of stockyard tradition on its horns by opening meat meccas that are architecturally stunning, female-friendly, larded with designer cuts, loaded with au courant side dishes — and charging serious moo-lah.

And despite the advice of their cardiologists and accountants, trend-conscious diners are succumbing to the sizzle.

"Most steakhouses are so cookie-cutter, and I think it was only a matter of time before something changed," says Puck, who notes that Cut has been sold out nearly every night since it opened, despite the fact that it's located just two blocks away from his famous Spago flagship and is more expensive. "Dining out is like theater, and in the old times, steakhouses were not theater."

Now, at least 20 well-known culinarians are hamming it up with the genre, from Emeril Lagasse, with his Delmonico Steakhouse in Las Vegas (ranked No. 3 in popularity among all restaurants in the latest *Zagat Survey*); to Bobby Flay, with his new 11,000-square-foot Bobby Flay Steak in Atlantic City; to New York-based Laurent Tourondel, who has just replicated his BLT Steak in Washington, D.C., and San Juan, Puerto Rico (and next year, Scottsdale, Ariz.).

Money, more money and restless creativity are driving this carnivorous caravan, says international restaurant consultant Michael Whiteman.

Developers of casinos, resorts and hotels, where many of the new cow palaces are located, sometimes view them as safer investments than fine-dining restaurants, "and they're willing to wave a lot of money at brand-name chefs," he says. "And chefs love the idea because it gets them away from fussy, fancy, overly mannered food and into something much more primal. But they can't resist adding to the basic product, so they've lifted it beyond the 'grill it and garnish it' school."

Those factors play to an audience that's increasingly wealthy and food-savvy. "A huge number of people are making an awful lot of money," says Whiteman, "and they're spending it in restaurants as if there were no tomorrow. These people are interested in showing off their connoisseurship. They're interested in the nuances of dry- and wet-aged beef, of grass-fed organic cattle and corn-fed feed-lot cattle, and they're willing to pay a lot of money to see what the differences are."

The trend emerged in the mid-1990s on two fronts: Globe-trotting chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten opened the opulent Prime at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, which featured gourmet side dishes and views of the dancing water fountains. And David Burke became chef at Maloney & Porcelli in New York. There, he "put the chef's touch to the steakhouse," he says, by studding the bedrock chops menu with quirky creations such as jars of "firecracker applesauce," salmon pastrami and massive pork shanks.

That led to a modernist stampede that still rumbles in more than a dozen major cities, most notably New York, Chicago and Las Vegas.

Chef-driven steakhouses still represent only a fraction of a genre that is dominated by mainstream national chains such as Morton's, Ruth's Chris, Smith & Wollensky and The Palm. But they've raised the stakes by promoting progressive elements, including:

•**Elite meats.** It's no longer enough for menus to advertise just certified Black Angus or USDA Prime. Now, diners expect customized beef: corn-fed or grass-fed; USDA Prime or highly marbled Wagyu beef from boutique American producers or from the Kobe region of Japan; and wet-aged or dry-aged for a specific number of weeks of the customer's choosing. Tom Colicchio's Craftsteak in Las Vegas and New York offers nearly 20 beef options. And for their new Primehouse in Chicago, Burke and his partners paid \$250,000 for a prize-winning bull and installed it as a stud at a top Kentucky ranch to ensure a steady supply of superior steak.

Of course, the price of such luxury cuts deeply: A top-grade, 6-ounce Japanese Kobe ribeye costs \$170 at Michael Mina's StripSteak in Las Vegas, while a USDA Prime 35-day-aged, 14-ounce New York sirloin at Cut costs \$58. And who knows how long those prices will hold, given the current ethanol-fueled demand for corn. (Chefs say their profit margins on the meat are much less than those on produce and alcoholic beverages.)

•**Distinctive cooking techniques.** It's no longer as simple as slab-meets-grill now that chefs boast of signature roasting methods. Colicchio's chefs sear most cuts in copper pans on the stove, then finish them off in 500-degree ovens. At Mina's StripSteak, meat is poached in oil at low temperatures for hours and finished on a mesquite-burning grill.

Rick Tramonto of the new Tramonto's Steak & Seafood in Wheeling, Ill., uses a combination of wood-burning oven, wood-burning grill and high-speed 1,200-degree broiler — a trio of equipment that costs \$40,000. "It gives us a lot of flexibility, and it's the heart of the kitchen," he says.

•**Sophisticated side dishes.** Here's where the line blurs between a chef's fine-dining flagship restaurant and his steakhouse. The meat is now often accompanied by a constantly changing lineup of dishes made with artisanal/seasonal/local/organic produce. And raw and marinated seafood offerings of astonishing variety (seven lobster options alone at Bobby Flay Steak), along with artisanal charcuterie (a dozen cured meats and cheeses at Quality Meats in New York), give new meaning to surf 'n' turf.

"We want to pay as much attention to starters as to the beef and make it a complete restaurant," says Colicchio, who features as many as 40 side dishes at Craftsteak, including a dozen types of raw oysters, seven types of mushrooms and 15 preparations of boutique vegetables.

"Steakhouses are becoming almost like what simple Italian food is — product-driven," says Mina. "It's not about changing the structure of the steakhouse, it's about improved product and technique and intensifying flavor."

Even spuds are nudged into gourmet territory: Look for goat cheese scalloped potatoes at Tramonto's, duck-fat fries with three sauces at StripSteak, goose-fat fries at Strip House in Houston and homemade chips at Michael Lomonaco's Porter House New York.

•**Dazzling décors.** Goodbye dark wood and leather. Hello water walls (SW Steakhouse in Las Vegas), wine walls (Craftsteak), 3,000-pound glass chandeliers (Tramonto's), skylights (Cut) and samurai swords dangling from the ceiling (Kobe Club in New York). At StripSteak, four projectors cast images of flowing water and fire onto ceiling panels.

•**Female-friendly approaches.** To broaden the customer base, designers are muting the classic, overtly masculine ambience (Tramonto's has purse stools and beautiful bathrooms), chefs are adding smaller cuts of meat to the menu, and waiters are trained to be egalitarian. Says Charlie Palmer, who runs Charlie Palmer Steak in Reno, Las Vegas and Washington, D.C.: "We are real students of who the clientele is, and 60% of dinner reservations are made by women. Is a woman likely to go to a dark, smoky steakhouse? So I wanted the anti-classic steakhouse — modern design, different thinking, up-to-date."

•**User-friendly wine lists.** Cabernet- and magnum-heavy lists still predominate. But restaurateurs recognize their customers' growing wine awareness (and perhaps are more sensitive to DUI laws), so more steakhouses feature extensive half-bottle selections and expansive by-the-glass programs. This is one area where a chain took the lead: The 51-unit Fleming's Prime chain began offering 100 wines by the glass and mix-and-match wine flights nine years ago.

While such innovations have elevated the genre, Burke cautions that steakhouse regulars are sensitive to bull. "You can't outsmart the steakhouse mentality," he says. "At the end of the day, when you have great meat, that's what they're coming in for."