

Food

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CUT FOR THE GRILL

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Save the pan-frying, broiling, roasting and braising for the other seasons. In New England's all-too-brief summer, when beef's on the menu, buy a steak and light the grill.

What exactly do you grill? If you have a good butcher, choices might seem endless — or overwhelming.

Tender cuts of beef best suited for the kind of high-heat, dry cooking that comes with grilling are from the least-exercised parts of the steer, its upper midsection: the rib, strip loin (also called short loin), and sirloin. That's where you'll find steakhouse favorites, including some that are trendy in restaurants but rarely seen in supermarkets. Underneath, the plate and flank sections are home to tougher steak cuts that have become popular for grilling but require extra care to render them tender.

The most elegant steak is also the softest, the aptly named tenderloin, which comes from the baseball-bat-shaped muscle that bisects the sirloin and strip loin. Also called a filet mignon, this steak commands a

premium price partly because there's such a small piece on each steer. Its fans swoon at the texture, smooth enough to cut with a butter knife. Its detractors find it so lean and mild as to be tasteless.

"No fat, no flavor," says Wayne Tumber, production supervisor at John Dewar & Co.'s Newmarket Square meat facility. "More fat, more flavor!"

Because of its intense marbling, Tumber would rather grill a ribeye, which is also a favorite of Food Network's Alton Brown. Or, better yet, a strip or sirloin, which Tumber, Dewar vice president Scott Brueggeman, and even owner John Dewar all agree is their favorite. A New York strip is the most popular steak at their Wellesley and Newton retail stores. "I'm a simple guy," Dewar says. "Just a nice, thick, well-marbled sirloin, and I'm a happy camper."

Dewar uses "strip" and "sirloin" interchangeably, which chef and cookbook author Chris Schlesinger says is unique to New England. Here,

butchers refer to the two as the same cut of meat: Sometimes they call it a New York strip, sometimes a New York sirloin, and sometimes a strip sirloin. But technically, Schlesinger says, a strip comes from a different primal cut of the steer than the sirloin.

Names aside, the strip is leaner and firmer than the ribeye, but juicy and fattier (and therefore more flavorful) than the tenderloin.

For those who don't want to choose between taste and tenderness, the T-bone and porterhouse cuts give the best of both worlds. Each has a T-shaped bone separating the larger strip from the smaller filet; the only difference between the two is that the porterhouse has a bigger filet.

If Schlesinger had to pick a steak, the porterhouse would be the one — or two, if you look at it that way. "I like that to get the proper thickness on it, it has to be huge he says. "It appeals to my Fred Flintstone carnivore thing, and I like the two different steaks in one thing. My girlfriend will have the filet, and I'll have the top loin. And I get to gnaw on the bone."

Then there are the tougher cuts, such as flank steak and skirt steak, that were once as cheap as chuck but have risen in price as their popularity has grown. Skirt is the traditional steak for fajitas, and Schlesinger calls it one of the best bangs for the buck on a steer, along with sirloin tips. Both skirt and flank are coarse-textured, meaning that they shouldn't be cooked to more than medium-rare or they'll be too tough.

Of course, a connoisseur would say the same thing about any steak in the butcher shop. Why go to all that trouble to pick the right piece of meat, and then overcook it?