GETTING STARTED: MEAT CUTS AND QUALITY

Chef Thomas Keller / Chapter Two

MASTERCLASS

GETTING STARTED: MEAT CUTS AND QUALITY

"Get to have conversations with [your butcher] about different qualities of beef, duck, chicken, and pork. You'll be able to really understand better what's available for you."

CHAPTER REVIEW

The better acquainted you are with meat, the more successful you'll be cooking it. Here Chef Keller introduces a variety of cuts and grades of beef, pork, and poultry while describing the characteristics that define them. Fat is flavor, so the more marbled the cut, the more flavorful—and more expensive—it tends to be. This is often reflected in the grade. Chef Keller underscores this point by showing the difference between choice sirloin and prime strip loin. Where choice strip loin is relatively lean, prime strip loin is generously marbled, albeit less so than an A-5 wagyu ribeye from Japan, one of the most richly marbled cuts of all.

Aging and air-drying are two common techniques that influence the flavor and texture of meat. Air-drying poultry, for instance, removes moisture from the skin so that it crisps more readily during cooking, where aging beef intensifies its flavors. There are two kinds of aging: wet and dry. Wet-aging involves cryovacking meat to seal in moisture; dry aging allows for evaporation. Beef can be aged for different periods of time. Chef Keller's sweet spot is 30 to 60 days, though he also enjoys beef that has been dry-aged for as long as 120 days, achieving a flavor so intense that Chef Keller finds it almost funky.

Just as Chef Keller's work at The French Laundry has inspired chefs and restaurateurs around the world, it has also influenced farmers and purveyors. Chef Keller persuaded the purveyor that supplies him with his beef to remove the deckle—a fatty, flavorful strip of muscle that Chef Keller loves—from the prime rib and sell it to him separately. It took some convincing, but the farm eventually obliged. Chef Keller's close relationships with farmers and purveyors have enhanced his work as a chef. He encourages you to cultivate such relationships. He also urges you to get know the people who work in your local grocery stores and markets. They'll give you a better understanding of the products available to you, and can even help you track down something special when the time requires.

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A visit to a butcher shop can be daunting. So many meats. So many cuts. And then there's the butcher him or herself, looming behind the counter, very often in a bloody apron, holding a knife. Take a deep breath. Don't be intimidated. The only serious mistake you can make at a butcher shop is to keep quiet. Ask questions. Ask about the pedigree or freshness of the meat, and don't shy away from seeking out recommendations. Keep an open mind. Your butcher might turn you on to a delicious cut of meat you've never tried or even heard of before. Many butchers don't just work with meat at their shops; they work with it in their home kitchens, so feel free to ask for cooking tips and recipe suggestions. A butcher's main job, of course, is to butcher, which means you also shouldn't hesitate to ask him or her to truss, tie, debone, or trim your meat. Those services might seem like 'extras,' but they shouldn't come at any additional cost. If you feel that your butcher has provided you with exceptional service, don't hesitate to leave a tip. It's not required, but it's appreciated.