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SARASOTA'S PREMIER MAGAZINE

MY SRQ FAVORITES

Monday, March 09, 2009

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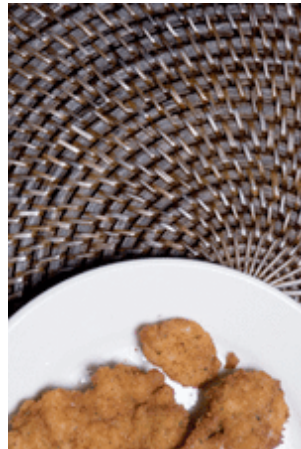
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Feature: Flank Ranks

Meat. Victuals. Protein.

We give it a million names, and just as many designations, but it’s the constant in our meals. Unless you’re a vegetarian (in which case, read no further), a meal out just wouldn’t pack the same satisfaction without a slice of something that once drew breath. But like the parts of an undivided Hereford steer, each restaurant in our tender town belongs to its own specialties. All the prime cuts are here. Our local restaurants proved to be in rare form when we went after the juicy details, so grab your cleavers and your sharpening steels—here are all the grisly details.

An order of Osso Bucco will keep you warm if you eat on the balcony at Cork.

For a dark, stewy cut like the pork shank, Cork’s slow prep and earthy additions are just the thing. This rustic Italian dish gets the classic treatment in Cork’s anachronistic modernist setting, with basil, garlic and plum tomato bleeding into the shank and russet potato gnocchi filling in the corners. Cork’s painstakingly slow braise renders the pork tender and, if such a word can be applied, flaky. At the very least it falls off the bone. One of our winter weaknesses.

The Bean Stalk Market Grill absolutely aces its chicken salad, steeping the bird in a depth of flavor that will make you wonder if this isn’t some new kind of poultry altogether. It’s all in the sourcing, as owner Bill O’Brien will tell you. He only uses organic, free-range chicken, which is then rotisserieed, picked and seasoned with fresh tarragon, lemon, spices and artichokes. This is a great start, but things really take off with the mayonnaise—a top-grade, noncommercial, organic blend that must be tasted to be believed, much less understood. A lunchtime must.

Kobe beef is great in theory. All livestock should receive the benefit of sake-and-beer baths, brush massages and all the grain they can handle. But for a simple Friday

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decompression dinner—maybe with a decent-but-not-extravagant Scotch—a little thrift only adds to the gentility. Snake River Farms supplies the Food Network’s Iron Chef America with its Wagyu/Angus hybrids. The Iron Chef, that is, and Zoria. The Idaho-raised steers derive from the same stock as Kobe Wagyu, so if they’re a little more rugged for their American upbringing, it’s easily chalked up to regional charm. A budget indulgence.

Family is front-and-center at Libby’s Cafe and Bar, where matriarch Libby’s kitchen aesthetic informs an upscale family concept in the heart of the Hillview neighborhood. The menu is almost as thick as a playbill, with organic farms and local growers in place of leading men and ladies. Names such as Niman Ranch, Ashley and Coach Farms accompany a little of everything: braised Wagyu shortribs, veal paillard, Colorado lamb chops and a rotating fifth business of seafood and chicken. And there are no prima donnas on this menu. Each dish, from the meatball South Beach “Sliders” to the Windy City 28 Ounce Bone-in Ribeye is content to embody the character of its ingredients. That means the pure flavor of the animal—the marriage of flesh and fire delivered to your plate—is unimpeded by gratuitous flourishes. The beef tastes like cows and the pork like pigs—the way it ought to be. Nothing upstages the food here and that’s enough.

The brisket is like a steer’s built-in pillow—a meaty cushion that rests over top of the sternum, which the cow leans on when it lies down to sleep. It should come as no surprise, then, that this is also one of the most buttery, fatty cuts of beef available. It’s barbecue’s “champagne of beers,” the cream of a humble crop perfectly at home served atop the Oaks Open Pit BBQ’s formica lunch counter. Its brisket sandwich exemplifies the kind of rich, creamy prep that the lower half of a cow really demands. It’s also on the low end of barbecue’s tangy scale, just like it should be.

The first thought to cross your mind upon receiving your order of duck at Euphemia Haye might be something like: “Wow. That’s really half a duck.” And it is. Impeccably crisped skin splits like a volcanic fissure to reveal soft duckling, just rounding the corner of medium and headed toward medium-well. The drumstick, which is fatter than the breast, approaches a noticeable oleaginous sweetness, which creates a nice variation from the more savory breast meat. The meal sticks with that arc—passing from dark-light meat to light-dark, rich to sweet. Stuffing and seasonal fruit sauce provide the sole accompaniment, as they have for decades since Euphemia Haye first introduced the Longboat waterfowl to its loyal locals and visitors .

You’ll earn your stripes for exotic meat at Lee’s Crab Trap, where a warm and casual seafood shack hides some of the weirdest meat available locally. Gator, ostrich and kangaroo put a bushmeat spin on the Palmetto swamp setting that couldn’t be more perfect. As far as taste, the gator skews toward slightly chewier chicken, and the kangaroo and ostrich taste like a combo between liver and ground chuck. It’s all worth a trip for the novelty, but once that wears off, that shrimp scampi starts looking mighty good.

Michael’s On East is another name synonymous with the town. If the restaurant’s reputation precedes it, the food at least backs it up. If you want what the people who work there eat, order the Veal Chop. Fourteen ounces of Provini veal is seared in butter with a salt-and-pepper crust (Tip: rare veal is tough. Order it medium and you’ll have

a more tender chop to enjoy). It's served with smashed basil/parmesan red skin potatoes and dressed with a rosemary tomato confit—a touch of acid to make your mouth water that much more. Veal-abstaining diners are recommended to the porcini rubbed Colorado Rack of Lamb, a comparably “young” meat, with a tomato/port reduction that manages the same balancing trick with appropriate ingredient substitutes.

The pasty is one of the Western world's oldest methods for eating meat on the fly. So for a lunch from the Old World, the 4&20 Pasty Co. on Clark Road can get you fed and back to your coal mine within the lunch hour. The restaurant tries to make a pocket for everyone, from original Cornish pasties to Philly Cheese Steaks, Steak and Kidney and vegetarian and Indian spiced sausage rolls. The crusts are consistently flaky, moist and paper-light. A quirky local gem.

There's a little of everything at Alpine Steak House, where you get the kind of expert specialties that only true meatheads still know how to do. No mention of Alpine is complete without a nod to its famous turducken and celeb-chef admirer Guy Fieri. But retro adventurers will be equally amazed by dishes such as Sauerbraten and Veal Picata. And then there are the steaks: filet, strip, shell, Delmonico and bone-in ribeye. Alpine's menu is like a greatest-hits list of the past hundred years of butchery, making it well worth some experimentation.

Some meat dishes are designed to give their diners an aristocratic (or at least nouveau riche) thrill. Cafe L'Europe is housed in the former real estate offices of John Ringling, so think of that while you break out the waist coat and pocket watch and sit down to a meal of chateaubriand or dover sole, both carved and served tableside for two. The sole is genuine—not mislabeled flounder—imported from the self-same straits (imported by RMS Queen-Mary-esque ocean liner, we can only assume). Dover sole has a worldwide reputation for its delicate texture and polyvalent depth of flavor, cooked here against a backdrop of decadent brown butter sauce. Chateaubriand has its own Henry VIII appeal, a cut of tenderloin so large (20 oz.) that it can only be served in pairs. That's a thick, hefty cut of meat, enriched with béarnaise and cabernet demiglace. Watch as it's carved before your eyes, like a miniature Lido Key in the hands of American royalty.

If you walked blindfolded into Geier's Sausage Kitchen, you might swear you'd walked into a giant salami. The smell of sausage and preserved meats pervades every ambient molecule of the store, spiced with little snippets of German conversation from the ladies behind the counters. This is the place to go for authentic blood sausage, a half-dozen different kinds of bologna, cheese astringent with nosey ammonia and gummy German candies as far as the eye can see. If it came from a German piggy or belongs in a piggy German, chances are it can be found at Geier's. And if you're picnicking in the Alps, Geier's also sells fresh hard rolls and bread.

No one does sheer somatic bliss quite like Beach Bistro, where each dish seems biochemically engineered to target every pleasure receptor in the human brain. This is the restaurant that brought the world Food Heaven, a cornucopia of lamb, lobster and foie gras. Each component has its own custom-adjusted prep method to make every bite as tender as it can be, and each plate is even custom-paired with a glass of sweet Sauterne—just because it will make your toes curl. One for the bucket list.

Shakespeare's English Pub has hamburgers worth the visit alone, and that's before you

take into account its 80-plus beer list. The pub's Black and Bleu Burger puts a block of cheese on a perfectly seared patty. The Brie Burger adds flourishes of sweetness to burgerdom, with a perfect X of soft, melting brie and an onion glaze that renders ketchup obsolete. Of course you can get a plain burger here as well, made with the same Angus beef as the designer plates. But like Shakespeare's "World of Beers" tour, this is one menu you're going to want to sample in its entirety.

Rosas Farm in Ocala grows world-class beef and wild boar. If you ever make the drive up there, it's worth stocking up for a few months. The meat is so fresh, so clean and delicious to begin with, that it will freeze forever, keeping you in organic, grass-fed burgers and wild boar sausage for a season. Or you can get it made fresh at The Polo Grill and Bar, where Rosas' meat is a routine inclusion on the menu in the form of a 100 percent organic burger. Rosas Farm's beef tastes clean and complex, the pristine conclusion to a charmed bovine life. It's artisanal beef, the equivalent of boutique cheese or hallmark village wine. It doesn't require a complicated or rich preparation because the key ingredient already carries more flavor than a whole spice rack could provide. This is no ordinary burger. Possibly the tastiest front in the green evolution.

Prime rib is meat like we were promised on The Flintstones: a giant knuckle of roasted, jiggling, pink meat, cut through with a few thick veins of fat, so rare and tender that it practically hurts your salivary glands to look at it. It's primal meat—the kind of meat that could tip a car. When you hear that call of the wild, scuttle your oversized, three-toed feet to The Chart House. Slow roasted, with au jus (aka civilized blood), this cut of steak is here to remind you what your canine teeth are for.

Hearing Chef Paul Mattison talk about his culinary upbringing is a little like watching an episode of The Wonder Years. His grandmother's hearth was always warm—the kind of place with a sausage grinder and tripe-wrapped liver sizzling in a pan upstairs and a parade of relatives sitting down to break bread every weekend. Keep that in mind if you're eating at Mattison's Forty-One and considering the Pot Roast Forty-One. Slow cooked meat defines quotidian comfort food because the prep takes care, or at least time. The quality comes more with prep than the cut, so whether grandma made it or the Crock Pot did, the pot roast goes hand in hand with sensible home econ planning. Taste it here as good as it gets.

Completing the nostalgia trifecta, Frugali Café is great for a trip down memory lane, or if you feel like emulating a Weimar decadent for the evening. The restaurant prepares continental renditions of dishes such as Veal Scallopini, Turkey Tetrazzini (with creamery butter!) and Rack of Lamb that make them favorites of transplants and the weekly regular crowd. It also does up the holidays in lavish comfort for its dedicated, older customers. Well worth the trip to the Desoto netherlands.

And you can't talk steak without a nod to Hyde Park Prime Steakhouse, where the precision of corporate restaurant planning and management meets like exactness in the selection and preparation of every cut of meat. Hyde Park specializes in classic—conservative even—steakhouse favorites, with an option to do them up with metro flair. That style is reflected in dishes such as Steak Dijon—bacon-wrapped petite cuts of tenderloin, charbroiled with a sweet Dijon hollandaise sauce—and the spicy Steak au Poivre, skillet seared with fresh peppercorns and cognac bordelaise sauce. These specialties sit alongside an equally long list of traditional fare, such as filet, bone-in ribeye and porterhouse, seared to perfection across 72 inches of charbroiler space in the

kitchen. The concept is not unlike balancing that fuchsia shirt with a more conservative suit. Eating a steak at Hyde Park is like buying the current model year of a BMW or shopping at Brooks Brothers. Quality has been assured—you can feel free to cut loose.

Derek's Culinary Casual is where to go when you want meat like you've never had it before. The menu changes so frequently that enumerating all the clever or strange protein preps would require a personal planner. But this is the restaurant that has raised the curtain on Study of Rabbit—a triptych of chocolate braised rabbit leg, rabbit and house-cured tasso cassoulet and pistachio crusted rabbit loin—Squab Two Ways and Land and Sea—a Latin-fusion pork-and-shrimp texture salad. The ingredients, rare or staple, have the flavor of raw perfection, but it's Chef Derek Barnes's creative preps—crisped, glazed and confit—that make each trip here a fresh experience. A menu worth tracking.

The Bean Stalk Market Grill, 2324 Gulf Gate Dr., Sarasota, 941-927-3838; Zoria, 1991 Main St., Sarasota, 941-955-4457; The Oaks, 6112 S. Tamiami Trl., Sarasota, 941-922-7778; Euphemia Haye, 5540 Gulf of Mexico Dr., Longboat Key, 941-383-3633; Michael's on East, 1212 East Ave. S., Sarasota, 941-268-5113; Shakespeare's English Pub, 3550 S. Osprey Ave., Sarasota, 941-364-5938; 4&20 Pasty Co., 5638 Swift Rd., Sarasota, 941-364-5938; Cork, 29 N. Blvd. of the Presidents, Sarasota, 941-388-2675; Lee's Crab Trap, 5611 US Highway 19, Palmetto, 941-722-6255; Alpine Steakhouse, 4520 S. Tamiami Trl., Sarasota, 941-921-3798; Café L'Europe, 431 St. Armands Cir., Sarasota, 941-388-4415; Geier's Sausage Kitchen, 7447 S. Tamiami Trl., Sarasota, 941-923-3004; Beach Bistro, 6600 Gulf Dr. N., Holmes Beach, 941-778-6444; Polo Grill and Bar, 10670 Boardwalk Loop, Lakewood Ranch, 941-782-0899; The Chart House, 201 Gulf of Mexico Dr., Longboat Key, 941-383-5593; Hyde Park Prime Steakhouse, 35 S. Lemon Ave., Sarasota, 941-366-7788; Mattison's 41, 7275 S. Tamiami Trl., Sarasota, 941-921-3400; Libby's Café and Bar, 1917 S. Osprey Ave., Sarasota, 941-487-7300; Frugali Café, 1617 DeSoto Rd., Sarasota, 941-343-7200; Derek's Culinary Casual, 514 Central Ave., Sarasota, 941-366-6565

—By *Brian Hughes*, Photography by *Mark Sickles*

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