

Britain's best steak

Buying British couldn't have a better advertisement than the results of Country Life's beef-tasting session, which reveals the best breed for steak. Caroline Cranbrook explains why meat from our traditional native cattle breeds is the best in the world

COUNTRY LIFE'S British beef tasting session was a celebration of a unique heritage. Every piece of meat we judged was delicious and a telling advertisement for our traditional British breeds, as well as the traditional methods used to rear them. It was a difficult but enjoyable task.

There are a number of reasons why beef produced from British breeds is exceptional. First, our cattle—and, indeed, sheep—spend most of their lives out of doors, feeding on a diet of grass, grass products and a limited amount of concentrates, often homegrown. Research suggests (and diners know) that grass-fed beef tastes better. Traditional breeds also have increased marbling of fat, which melts into the meat during cooking and gives it a better flavour. Treatment at slaughter is another factor. If animals are stressed before slaughter, the meat becomes tough. Short journeys to the local abattoir equal less stress for the animal, fewer 'food miles' and better meat. Likewise, proper maturing is vital, and all the contestants' beef had been hung on the bone for at least two to three weeks before we tried it. This contrasts to animals destined for supermarkets, which often travel long distances to slaughter; very little of their meat is hung and treated with the care it receives at the smaller meat plants and

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butchers. Another argument in Britain's favour is that animals reared extensively on grass produce less methane (a greenhouse gas) and don't require the same amount of concentrates, which have both an economic and an environmental cost.

Our grazing livestock provide us with wonderful meat, but they have a much wider significance. They are the guardians of our landscape. The mosaics of small fields, downland, heathland, fells, salt-marshes and most of our wildlife reserves all have to be grazed to maintain their beauty and biodiversity. Without livestock, they would

revert either to arable cultivation or become abandoned thickets.

Livestock are at the heart of the local food economy. It's almost impossible to run a farm shop or farmer's market without a local meat supply. Butchers rely on the superior quality of the meat they sell to differentiate themselves from the majority of supermarkets, and they are often the only independent shops left in our market towns. Pubs and restaurants also rely on quality local meat.

Although much of our food heritage has disappeared, we still have our traditional British meat. But even that is under threat—from supermarket pressure for greater uniformity of product, which is geared to the size of supermarket packaging, from the burden of increasing costs and from the increasing regulation which affects farmers, abattoirs and butchers.

In these difficult economic times, we can play a very real part in guaranteeing the survival of our British breeds, our local food economies, our landscape and our countryside—by buying British beef. When you eat out or go shopping, ask where the meat came from and the name of the breed. If you can, buy it from your butcher, who can give you expert advice. By doing this, we all can make a difference—and eat very well indeed.

The best steak in Britain

How we did it

GENEROUS local producers supplied us with steaks (sirloin on the bone, and fillet) from Britain's native cattle breeds—for more information, visit www.tbmm.co.uk

Where

THE STEAKS were cooked by staff at the Hix Oyster & Chop House, London EC1 (www.hixoysterandchophouse.co.uk)

Who

JUDGES were: The Countess of Cranbrook (campaigner for local food), Mark Price (chief executive of Waitrose), Richard Lutwyche (Traditional Breeds Meat Marketing), Mark Hix (award-winning restaurateur), Fergus Henderson (founder of the St John's restaurant), Jack O'Shea (butcher), Carla Carlisle (COUNTRY LIFE columnist and farmer), Mark Hedges (Editor), Rebecca Pearson (Features Editor) and Flora Birtles (Features Assistant)

Charlie Hopkinson





Above Made to make your mouth water: a perfectly cooked succulent British steak. Beef from our native cattle breeds is the best in the world

The winner: The Longhorn

THE LONGHORN (*right*), which originated from Craven, northern England, became popular in the 18th century when Robert Bakewell used selective breeding methods to refine it. Longhorns are docile, able to calve easily and renowned for longevity. Our steak came from an animal fed only on ancient pasture in Lincolnshire. The animal was 20 months old and the carcass hung for 2½ weeks. Longhorn beef has long been praised by chef Heston Blumenthal.

Huw Jones/Stockfood; NHPA

Judges' verdict

'Definitely the winner; delicious'
Carla Carlisle

'Perfect, 9 out of 10; very sweet and melts in the mouth'
Mark Price

'Soft on the palate, with a sweet, tender flavour'
Jack O'Shea

'This is the perfect steak'
Mark Hedges

Meat supplied by Meridian Meats, Lincolnshire (01507 533697; www.meridianmeatshop.co.uk) >

www.countrylife.co.uk

