

chefs make the cut

Why butcher in-house? There are challenges, but more and more chefs are finding the benefits. / BY LAURA TAXEL

a pig's head gazes placidly up at Melissa Khoury from its perch on the prep counter. The chef pats the snout fondly, and then goes at it with a 12-inch slicing knife. She inserts the tip just behind the ear and follows the natural jawline, carefully separating the cheeks from the skull with the layer of fat underneath intact. The cheeks will be used for jowl bacon. The rest of the meat ends up in head cheese, terrines and sausages.

Khoury, executive chef at Washington Place Bistro and Inn, Cleveland, gets four pig's heads every other week and an entire hog once a month from a local farm. She is among a growing number of chefs around the country who are doing their own butchering, switching from boxed meats to buying sub-primals, primal cuts and whole animals.

Here, five experts talk about the craft of butchering, why it matters, the benefits and challenges, and how to get started acquiring the skills to do it yourself.

learning on the job

As a student at Johnson & Wales University, Norfolk, Va., Khoury had only one day of training in animal fabrication. "It was hands-on with chicken and fish, but when it came to a hindquarter of beef, we watched while the instructor did a demo," she says.

Khoury is grateful to chefs she worked under who gave her the opportunity to develop butchering skills. "There were a lot of mess-ups that became family meals," she says.

Small in stature but with visible biceps, Khoury can now handle a 200 lb. pig, breaking it down by herself in about 45 minutes. It takes 10-15 hours spread out over two or three days for complete trotter-to-tail processing, from portioning out the loin to recovering all the "good bits, including the tongue" from the head after it has been boiled.

She regularly tackles 30 lb. rib-to-top-leg hunks of lamb. The bones go into stock, scrap is ground for mortadella or merguez, and she averages just a pound of discard. All her beef comes in as primals. It would be easier, she admits, to buy pre-cut proteins from her distributor, but not better. "To commit the necessary time and effort, you have to believe in quality, sustainable farm-to-table practices and the value of doing things this way."

whole-animal thinking

In his position as a meat scientist with Certified Angus Beef LLC, Phil Bass, Ph.D., leads interactive seminars for chefs at the organization's new Education & Culinary Center in Wooster, Ohio, which includes a well-equipped fabrication area where he provides an introduction to custom butchering and innovative cuts.

"There's a great deal of interest in what was a dying trade," says Bass. "I see it as an expression of a passion for food and a very personal, emotional connection to what goes on the plate." But,

ADVICE
"READ, WATCH AND THEN GET IN THERE AND DO IT. I LEARNED BY BUYING HOGS AND BUTCHERING THE HELL OUT OF THEM. MY FIRST PORK LOIN LOOKED LIKE IT HAD BEEN CHEWED OFF. BUT THAT'S HOW YOU LEARN."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

- 1) Foodservice distributors and other meat professionals who work with Certified Angus Beef's Masters of Brand Advantages program participate in a meat-fabrication course.
- 2) Phil Bass is corporate meat scientist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.
- 3) Melissa Khoury cooks a whole hog as a house-warming gift for a friend in September 2012.
- 4) Derek Simcik will break down this calf's tail and use it in "braised oxtail."
- 5) Craig Deihl's charcuterie program at Cypress restaurant produces selections such as these.

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he warns, this is about more than merely putting knife to meat. There are no shortcuts to becoming proficient. "It's essential to be effective and efficient, and the only way to achieve that is to practice, practice, practice."

Only a few simple tools are required to get started. Bass recommends a 6-inch Forschner boning knife, a 10-inch Forschner "breaking" knife and a meat handsaw. More importantly, he

notes, is an understanding of the carcass: the proportions are different, but skeleton and musculature are remarkably similar among the four-legged set. The highly desirable middle meats are easy to sell. But, he continues, restaurants shouldn't get into butchering unless the clientele are adventurous and willing to eat what can be made with all the rest.

ADVICE

"AN ANIMAL IS PUT TOGETHER LIKE A PUZZLE. JUST FIND AND FOLLOW THE SEAMS WHERE THE PIECES FIT TOGETHER, AND THEY'LL COME APART NATURALLY. MAKE STEWS AND STIR-FRY WITH YOUR MISTAKES, AND DON'T FORGET THAT WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, THERE'S ALWAYS THE MEAT GRINDER."

primal decisions

Cypress in Charleston, S.C., is a steak-centric restaurant. But executive chef Craig Deihl, who recently attended a session at the Certified Angus Beef center, buys only the primals. Cutting them in-house is labor-intensive, he acknowledges, but it's also economical. "I spend less than I would on pre-cut meat, and create value-added products from scrap."

He offers burgers, foot-longs and bratwurst at the bar made from trim; roasts bones for his demi-glace; and prepares a whipped beef-fat butter to brush on T-bones and sirloins as they cook, noting that diners like their meat to look lean but want the taste that only fat can deliver. He was breaking down three lambs every couple of weeks, but has switched to buying 10 legs, instead. "My farmer was having a hard time selling them, and this is a way to help him."

Deihl, a charter member of The Butcher's Guild, a meat-cutters support group, invested in a used band saw, a five-horsepower grinder and a cryovac machine for optimal storage. The equipment, he says, quickly paid for itself.

ADVICE

"START SMALL. BUY BONE-IN PRODUCT AND DEVELOP YOUR KNIFE SKILLS. THEN MOVE ON TO WORKING WITH SUB-PRIMALS. PRACTICE ON LOWER-QUALITY, LESS-EXPENSIVE MEAT. DON'T PURCHASE A WHOLE LOCAL PASTURE-RAISED ANIMAL UNTIL YOU FEEL CONFIDENT IN YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND ABILITIES TO HANDLE IT."

breaking down the concept

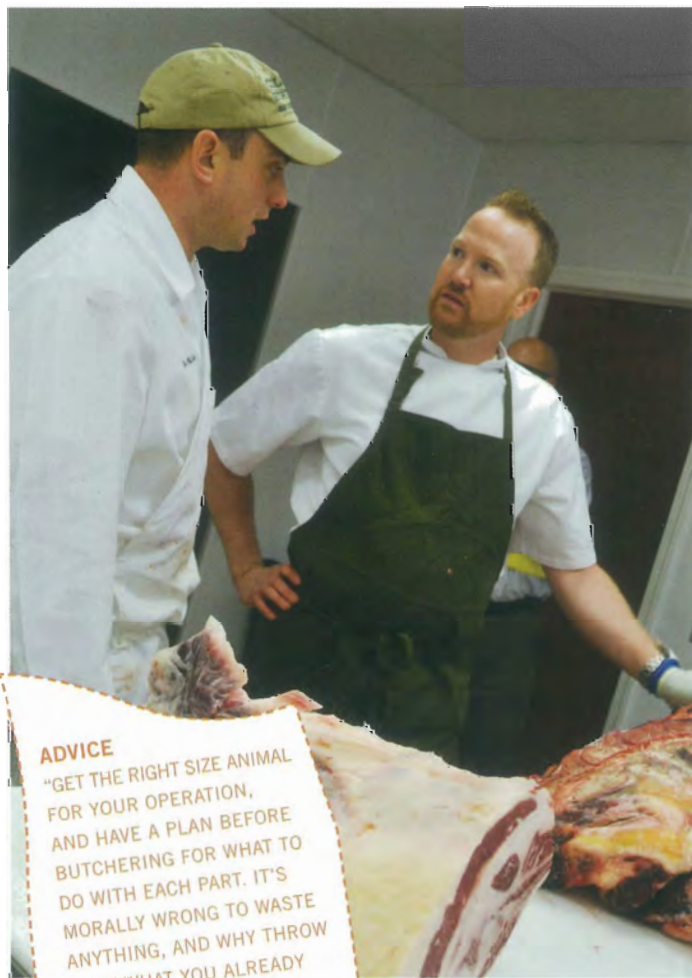
Derek Simcik, executive chef of Atwood Café in Chicago, says he butchers all his own proteins because he's a control freak, a perfectionist and enjoys playing with food. "I want every ingredient to be the best it can be, each portion exact, and I like the creative challenge of utilizing all the byproducts, which often become my specials."

Even in his admittedly small kitchen, Simcik can handle whole lambs, goats and suckling pig, half hogs and beef front quarters armed with cleavers of various sizes and a hacksaw from Northwest Cutlery. "Don't get one meant for wood from a hardware store," he warns. "The blades are treated with chemicals."

The physical work requires focus and concentration, but he finds it both relaxing and rewarding. "It puts me in my happy zone, and is a time for me to teach and share."

At Seattle's Matt's in the Market, a locally raised pig arrives every Friday. The way Shane Ryan, recently promoted from sous chef to top toque, takes it apart depends on what he wants to

Phil Bass, right, talks with Craig Deihl of Cypress restaurant during a recent meat-fabrication session at the Certified Angus Beef® Education & Culinary Center.



ADVICE

"GET THE RIGHT SIZE ANIMAL FOR YOUR OPERATION, AND HAVE A PLAN BEFORE BUTCHERING FOR WHAT TO DO WITH EACH PART. IT'S MORALLY WRONG TO WASTE ANYTHING, AND WHY THROW AWAY WHAT YOU ALREADY PAID FOR?"

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LEARNING RESOURCES

Books

Principles of Meat Science (Kendall Hunt Publishing Co., 2012), by Elton D. Aberle

The Art of Beef Cutting: A Meat Professional's Guide to Butchering and Merchandising (Wiley, 2011), by Kari Underly

The Whole Beast: Nose to Tail Eating (Ecco, 2004), by Fergus Henderson

Organizations and Associations

Beef Innovations Group

Information on new value cuts and access to meat specialists
www.beefinnovationsgroup.com

Certified Angus Beef LLC

www.certifiedangusbeef.com

The Butcher's Guild

www.thebutchersguild.org

American Lamb Board

Free copies of educational DVDs and instruction sheets
www.americanlamb.com

Classes

"Foundations of Meat Fabrication,"

The Rocky Mountain Institute of Meat, Cook Street School of Culinary Arts, Denver

www.rockymountaininstituteofmeat.com

Bovine Myology, University of Nebraska, Lincoln


Bone up on whole-animal anatomy online, virtually dissect a carcass and watch fabrication videos.

<http://bovine.unl.edu>

ADVICE
"LOOK FOR AN OLD-SCHOOL, SMALL-PRODUCTION BUTCHER SHOP IN YOUR VICINITY, AND OFFER TO WORK WITHOUT PAY ON YOUR OFF DAYS AND IN YOUR FREE HOURS. OR STAGE WITH AN EXPERIENCED CHEF WHO IS DOING BUTCHERING."

serve. He might cut off the front and back shanks for ham hocks or braise the legs for a pulled pork sandwich; brine shoulders for his signature "porkstrami" or turn them into hams. Before slicing into the midsection, he must know whether he's going for chops, ribs or pulling the loin and tenderloin for porchetta. If he offers pork chops, he'll have to buy extra, and he always needs additional bellies.

"We do 150 for lunch and 120 for dinner daily. It's hard for one pig to provide everything we need, but two is too much," Ryan says. "They average 125-150 lbs. Larger is more than we can handle here."

Kitchen staff also butcher 25-30 lb. salmon and cods. Fish, says Ryan, requires even more finesse than meat. "We have multiple guys who can do this. Others come in early because they want to learn. It takes some muscle, but mostly skill." 

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