

STEAK by Mark Schatzker

A book review by John Chotkowski

Mark Schatzker, a contributor to *Condé Nast Traveler*, is indeed a traveler and his new book *Steak* takes us on his journey to discover the secrets of a good steak. He travels from Texas, where he sees, smells, and samples the best that the commodity beef industry in the USA has to offer, to Italy, France, Argentina, Japan and Scotland, nations whose love of beef flourishes but under completely different parameters. He embarked on this journey because he loved beef but was mystified as to why so much of the beef in this country is disappointing. “Why was the meat so bland?” he asks. Was beef better in some other country and, if so, why. “What could account for those rare standout steaks?” “Somewhere there had to be someone who knew the secret of creating it.”

He starts with the proposition that “steak is king” and documents that man, since prehistory, had a need to consume meat. Its unique flavor kindled a desire for its consumption and its consumption has played a critical role in human evolution. The Japanese even have a separate word for the taste of meat, (the so-called fifth taste along with salty, sweet, bitter, and sour) – umami, which translates in Japanese as “delicious”.

He was told in Texas what we all have been taught, that the key to good beef flavor is marbling and to get good marbling the magic elixir is feedlot corn. Since the 1960’s, marbling has been the key visual marker used by the USDA for grading beef, the inference being that one can indeed predict the flavor, juiciness and tenderness of beef just by looking at it. However, he notes, the results of scientific studies are mixed and his personal experience indicates that marbling, for which the consumer pays a premium, fails to reliably deliver the best steak. Indeed his positive experience with steak from producers who raised and finished their animals on grass suggested to him that grass “does make the best tasting steak” but cautions that “bad grass makes bad steak”.

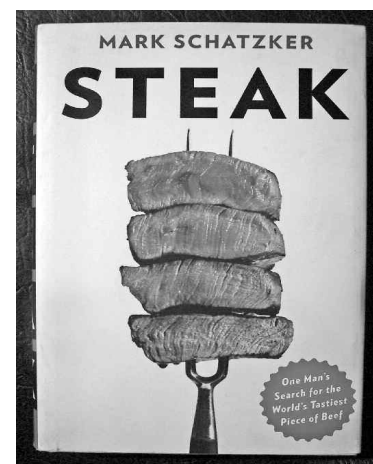
From his travels Mr. Schatzker gathered a wealth of information on beef appreciation, production and preparation as practiced beyond our borders. In Japan, for instance, fat is king of the palate pleasers and the king of fat is the black Wagyu breed, the world’s marbling champ. (In the fish world, we learn that it’s

bluefin tuna.) Beef, and most everything else raised in Japan, is designated not only by its breed but also by its origin. Hence, Kobe Wagyu beef derives from Wagyu cattle raised in the Kobe prefecture. (And despite its reputation in this country, Kobe Wagyu beef in its home nation ranks second to Wagyu beef from Matsusaka.) We also learn that the Japanese have been allowed to eat beef only since 1868, the year the 1,000 year old ban against eating 4 legged animals was lifted. And they eat small. For instance, Mr. Schatzker’s steak consisted of a credit card size piece of beef 3mm thick that was cooked almost instantaneously on a searingly hot rock. Dripping fat, it was delicious although the silky texture was deemed more impressive than the flavor. For beef flavor he preferred tongue.

In Japan, as in Italy and France, he noted that much emphasis was placed on the influence that the site of origin has on the flavor of beef. In France, the “terroir” – “the idea that you can taste geography” – and in Italy the “savor” – “any food where you can taste the nature that produced it” – ranked high in importance as a determiner of the quality of steak.

Of particular interest to cattle people is the critical question regarding the influence of breed on the quality of steak. Clearly, following Robert Bakewell’s revolutionary selective breeding program that led to the Dishley Longhorn, the first recognized breed of cattle, numerous other breeds have been developed, each accentuating certain traits such as size, degree of muscling, growth rates and marbling ability. But, Mr. Schatzker asks, when it comes to the eating qualities of beef, is breed important?

In considering his answer to that question he called on his experience of having sampled steak from a number of different breeds including Angus, Aubrac and Limousin in France (with a delicious sauce made from hay), auroch-type (thanks to the Nazi’s effort to recreate the breed), Podolica and Chianina (Italy), Wagyu and Highland. Please excuse this reviewer if he skips directly to his appraisal of our Grand Olde Breed as, frankly, all others paled in comparison. Mr. Schatzker writes that “there was, however, one steak that I could not get out of my head: that red slice of Scottish loin from the bank of the river Earn, barely marbled, silky even when raw, its fat the color



of butter. Angus Mackay’s Highland rib eye was the most flavorful steak I’d ever eaten. It was also the juiciest steak I’d ever eaten, and the tenderest, too”. And also “Angus MacKay’s rib eye – a life changing steak”. A subsequent discourse on muscle type in different breeds also favored Highlands because “Highland steak did have an undeniably fine grain to it. An A-plus steak”. Clearly, Mr. Schatzker has discovered what we have known all along regarding the superb eating qualities of Highland beef and we may even forgive him for concluding that the answer to the question of does “it all come down, finally, to breed?” was only “Perhaps”.

Steak is a book title that hardly hints at the treasure trove of information contained in its 290 pages including a healthy bibliography and an excellent index. The author researched his topic extensively and interviewed, with appropriate skepticism, an array of national and foreign experts in his effort to discover and assess the factors purported to go into producing a great steak. He covers many of the topics of the day including pasture health, animal health and welfare, the age of beeves at slaughter, dry aging after slaughter, antibiotics, feedlots, animal and human nutrition and more. He also understands the history and is a keen observer of the character and customs of the nations he visited, reporting his insights with a refreshing lightness and sense of humor that make reading an easy pleasure. I would recommend *Steak* to every Highland breeder for the knowledge it imparts and for the encouragement it offers to those of us who believe in the unique value of this special breed.