

Custom-Cutting Beef Tenderloin

For fresher, less expensive
steaks and roasts,
cut your own

BY MATTHEW LUST

If you consider meat-cutting the exclusive territory of professional butchers, you may be surprised to know that cutting your own custom steaks and roasts can be as easy as whisking up a vinaigrette. By cutting it yourself, you can be sure your meat is fresh, your steaks will be the right size and perfectly trimmed, and you'll save money—up to \$2.50 a pound. For summer entertaining, when the grill is the place to be, cutting your own beef makes a lot of sense.

As a professional meat cutter, I'll take you step by step through the process of cutting and trimming a beef tenderloin, using only a few basic tools. Whole tenderloins are usually available in plastic vacuum packs in the meat section of supermarkets, but if your store doesn't carry them, you can ask to have one ordered. You can make thin filet steaks for quick pan-frying, thicker steaks for grilling, and a luxurious tenderloin roast.

YOUR TOOLS: TWO SHARP KNIVES

To make your work efficient, you'll need two high-quality knives (a butcher knife and a utility or boning knife; see sidebar on p. 60), a sharpening steel, a large cutting board, and an apron.

Be very careful whenever you use knives. They should be sharp, and the best way to use them safely is to let them do the work for you. Don't force the knife through the meat. The knife should glide through the meat using only minimal pressure.

STORING YOUR STEAKS AND ROASTS

Any cut can be safely stored, tightly wrapped, in the refrigerator for up to three days. To freeze the meat, wrap pieces individually in waxed paper. Lay them flat on a baking sheet and freeze. When frozen, seal the packages in freezer bags. These can be stored for up to three months.



KNIVES THAT MAKE THE CUT

I like to use knives that have a curved profile because they do some of the work for me. When I pull the knife, the curved blade forces its way deeper into the meat and makes a clean slice. Knives with a straight back also work, but they take a little more pressure on your part. Never use a serrated edge to cut meat: the meat will be sawed and shredded instead of sliced.

When you're working with any large piece of meat, you need a long carving knife to make the initial cuts. For trimming fat and other detail work where you don't need a lot of blade, an easy-to-handle small utility knife is best.

TRIMMING A WHOLE TENDERLOIN

Begin by opening the plastic bag, draining off any excess liquid, and placing the tenderloin on the cutting board with the fat side facing up.



1 Use a knife to cut tougher fat and sinew. The technique for removing fat is a matter of pulling and cutting. Start at the thinner end of the tenderloin. Hold the layer of fat and silver membrane taut, and slice it off with a boning knife.



2 Use your fingers to pull off the soft fat. Peel and pull the soft and crumbly fat until most of it is removed.

The tenderloin doesn't need to be fat-free when you start cutting steaks, but remove enough so that you have a clear view of the meat and of the place where you want to make your first cut.

CUTTING A WHOLE TENDERLOIN

The tenderloin can be cut into steaks (filet steaks and smaller filet mignons) and also into roasts, such as the classic Châteaubriand (a 5-inch roast cut from the center of the tenderloin) or a larger roast that needs trussing. Tenderloin is also excellent when cut into thin strips for stir-fries.



1 Measure and then cut a steak. Before cutting anything, use a ruler to measure your thumb from the tip of the nail down. Note where the 1/2-, 3/4-, and 1-inch marks are so you can use your thumb as a guide to cut your steaks consistently. For a filet steak, start at the tenderloin's thick end, measure off about an inch and slice through the meat, using a few clean strokes. Do not saw back and forth. Cut smaller filet mignons from the thin end of the tenderloin.



2 Use your fingers for the final trim. Tenderloin steaks should have little fat on them. After cutting, just pull away any remaining fat.

TURNING A TENDERLOIN INTO A ROAST

The tenderloin can also provide a beautiful roast. And since you cut it yourself, its size is up to you.



1 To make a large filet roast, cut off about six steaks from the thick end of the tenderloin. Trim any excess fat from the tenderloin and tuck the small end under to make an even roast.



2 To truss the roast, tie several lengths of kitchen twine securely around the meat, spacing them about 1½ inches apart. Roast at 450° until the internal temperature is about 135° for medium rare.

Matthew Lust has all of his fingers and is a journeyman meat cutter at the IGA in Lagrange, Ohio.

How to cook a steak

BY RICHARD CHAMBERLAIN

When you've custom-cut your own steak, you want to cook it perfectly. I prepare 200 pounds of beef every day at my restaurant, and I know how to give good beef the treatment it deserves.

CHOOSE YOUR METHOD TO SUIT THE SIZE OF THE STEAK Steaks from prime- or choice-grade meat are tender. To retain moisture and flavor, tender meat needs the dry, intense heat of grilling, broiling, searing, or roasting.

The steak's thickness determines how close the meat needs to be to the heat. You want to coordinate a nicely seared surface with the right degree of doneness inside. Cook thin steaks very close to the heat; thick steaks, farther away. For example, you wouldn't broil a 6-ounce filet: by the time the surface was seared, the inside would be overcooked. Pan-searing or roasting in a heavy skillet would be a better choice; these give the meat more contact with hot metal. Some cuts get the best results from a combination of cooking methods.

Here are some sample cooking techniques and times; all produce a rare to medium-rare steak.

◆ **12-OUNCE FILET STEAK:** Season the entire filet with salt and freshly ground pepper. Broil or grill it 4 inches from the flame. Cook each side for 3 minutes, and then turn again and cook each side for 2 minutes, for a total of 10 minutes. Let it rest for 3 to 5 minutes before serving to allow the juices to redistribute.

◆ **10-OUNCE NEW YORK STRIP OR RIB-EYE:** Heat a cast-iron skillet until it's smoking hot. Season the steak on both sides with salt and freshly

ground pepper. Sear the steak in the skillet for 1½ minutes on each side. Don't use oil; the steak's fat will provide enough. Remove it from the pan and let it rest for 3 to 5 minutes before serving.

◆ **16-OUNCE NEW YORK STRIP OR RIB-EYE:** Heat a grill until very hot and heat the oven to 400°F. Season both sides of the steak heavily with salt and freshly ground pepper. Put the steak on the grill and cook it for four minutes on each side, turning once. Remove it, allow to rest for 10 minutes, and then put it in the hot oven for 4 minutes. Remove it, let it rest for 3 to 5 minutes, slice, and serve.

Chamberlain's Homemade Steak Sauce

A good steak deserves a great sauce. I'd like to think this is one of them.
Yields 1⅓ cups.

1 Tbs. olive oil
¼ cup chopped onion
2 Tbs. honey
¼ cup apple-cider vinegar
¼ cup balsamic vinegar
¼ cup soy sauce
¼ cup Ruby Red grapefruit juice
¼ cup beef broth
¼ cup Worcestershire sauce
3 Tbs. tomato paste
2 tsp. powdered garlic
2 Tbs. raisins
1½ tsp. black peppercorns
¾ tsp. dried thyme
½ tsp. salt

Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan. Sauté the onions over medium heat until soft. Add the honey and continue cooking for 2 min. Add the remaining ingredients. Bring to a boil and reduce the heat to medium low. Simmer for 1 hour, stirring occasionally. Remove and cool. Purée in blender until smooth. Refrigerated, the sauce will keep indefinitely.

Richard Chamberlain is the chef/owner of Chamberlain's Prime Chop House in Dallas, Texas. ◆