

Making the Most of Flank Steak

Tasty cut is tough customer

BY LISSA DOUMANI & HIROYOSHI SONE



For years, flank steak was just about the cheapest cut of beef you could buy, and in those days it was commonly braised and stewed. You'd never have found it on a restaurant menu, although when we were chefs at Spago in Los Angeles, we ate flank steak at staff dinners. Now it's accepted and popular among home cooks and chefs alike.

Once restaurants discovered it, demand drove the price up. Now that flank steak can cost as much as more tender steak from the loin, it makes sense to treat it like a choicer cut. But since it's expensive and not so tender, why buy it in the first place? The answer is that it's simply one of the most flavorful cuts a steer has to offer.

FLANK STEAK PRIMER

The flank of a steer is the lower belly behind the ribs. Each side of beef yields just one flank steak—a flat muscle, oval in shape, between one and three pounds and about two inches thick. Flank steak has very little fat and a noticeably coarse grain that runs the length of the piece (see illustration), a very important characteristic, as we'll explain later. First, though, we want to mention a cut of beef similar to flank in appearance and character, and that is skirt steak.

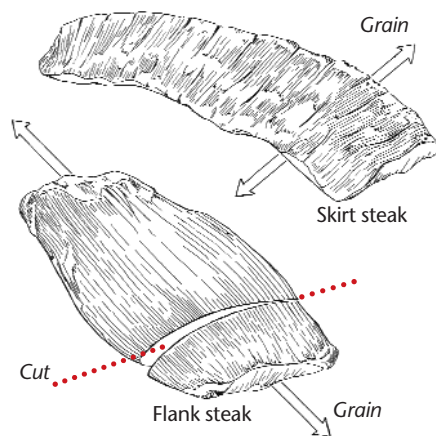
Skirt steak also comes from the underside of the steer, from a section of the belly known as the plate, which lies just forward of the flank. The skirt is up to two feet long, about six to seven inches wide and about an inch and a half thick. Like flank steak, skirt has a thin, patchy covering of fat and a well-defined grain. Unlike flank's lengthwise grain, the grain in skirt steak runs across the cut. It's important to be able to tell flank and skirt apart: we've seen skirt steak sold as flank steak in some markets. Skirt usually is—and should be—less expensive because it's even stringier and tougher than flank, although you can use the two in much the same way.

The term *grain* describes the direction in which the muscle fibers lie. Muscles work in one direction only, and the more work they have to do, the more defined the grain will be. Look at most pieces of meat and you'll actually see the lines of muscle fibers going in one direction, unless it's a cut such as a round steak that slices through the muscle longitudinally (across the grain, rather than along it).

Knowing what part of an animal's body the muscle

serves tells us what the meat is like. Those lower belly muscles were used every time the animal took a step or even breathed. The stronger the muscle, the tougher—but often the more flavorful—the meat. A cut from the flank will be tougher than, say, the filet, which hangs out up on the back and doesn't work very hard. It will also be a lot more tender than the shank or lower leg, which not only gets heavy use but also has a lot of connective tissue, or gristle.

Flank has very little internal fat, so it's a good choice for people who are concerned about fat intake but who want to eat beef. Most of the fat in this cut is on the outside and can be easily removed. *Marbling*, the term for tiny pockets of fat distributed throughout meat, is characteristic of the tenderest cuts of beef, like a New York steak. Connoisseurs prize marbling for the flavor it gives. In the rush toward health, however, everyone wants leaner meat. As the industry responds to public demand, the fat percentage in meats will continue to go down. But as meat gets leaner, we sacrifice flavor and tenderness.



For tenderest results, slice across the grain.

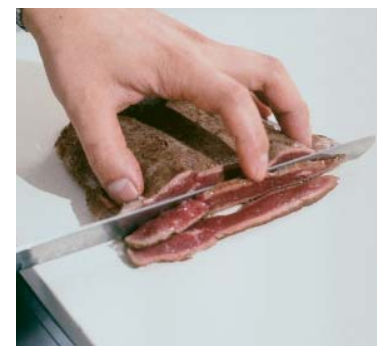
STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING TENDERNESS

There are several strategies for dealing with flank steak to ensure that it's as tender as possible when it comes to the table. In our kitchen, two are non-negotiable: we never overcook the meat, and we always cut it into thin slices across the grain. Beyond that, there's the option of marinating for a few hours. A fourth is to pound the steak with a meat hammer. We always use the first two strategies; sometimes we use all four.

Slice across the grain—Whether you're slicing the flank steak before it's cooked or after, always cut across the grain. This is true of any meat product. Cutting across the grain results in short meat fibers that are easy to chew. Because the grain runs lengthwise on a flank steak, all you have to do is cut straight across and you've got it.

Some people like to cut flank steak at an angle as well as across the grain. Instead of little thin slices you get something that looks more like a slice of a roast. This idea may have started in restaurants to give the servings better eye appeal. To slice this way, hold your knife at a 30° angle to the top of the steak and slice across the grain. To get a smooth slice without ragged edges, try not to saw and use only a couple of strokes of the knife to cut each slice.

Pound lightly to break fibers—Pounding slices of flank steak with a meat mallet helps break up the



Slicing meat across the grain gives the tenderest results. For flank steak with its lengthwise grain, this means cutting straight across. Here, Hiro Sone slices seared flank steak ever so thin for his version of carpaccio.



For better eye appeal, cut larger pieces of meat by slicing the steak into scallops. Hold the knife at about a 30° angle and cut slices a quarter inch thick. Then pound the scallops briefly if desired, and marinate.

For a classic bistro meal, serve a paillard of flank steak with a shallot sauce and french fries (see recipe, p. 59).



To make a paillard (meat pounded for grilling), hold the knife at a very low angle, but not horizontal, and cut slices a quarter inch thick. The meat fibers are longer when sliced at this



low angle. Pounding the meat breaks up the fibers slightly, and so tenderizes the meat. Steak sliced and pounded in this way, then grilled, results in a paillard.

fibers and also flattens the meat, allowing it to cook faster. You can use either the flat or the toothed face of your meat mallet. Be careful not to pound too much because the meat will start to break apart and develop holes, and it will lose all its juices when cooking. Once over the surface of the meat using the toothed face is enough.

Marinate for flavor and tenderness—Flank is the perfect candidate for marinating. Typically a marinade flavors and tenderizes. Most marinade recipes combine herbs, spices, and something acidic, such as wine, vinegar, or lemon juice. The acid breaks down the proteins in the muscle, and so tenderizes the meat. We've always argued that meat should not be left in strong marinades for a long time. Some recipes say it's okay to leave the meat in overnight, but we think all you get out of that is a steak with no meat flavor left in it and with a texture that's out of balance—too tender on the outside while still solid inside. Usually, three hours is plenty to impart flavor and to tenderize the meat. To find out if a marinade is the right strength, taste it. If it makes your mouth pucker, it's too strong.

When we want just flavor but not the tenderizing effect of a marinade, we do a dry rub of spices and herbs. This is simply a mixture of ingredients, such as salt, pepper, cayenne, thyme, chili powder, or cumin, rubbed on the meat. Because a dry rub doesn't affect the meat's texture, it can be left on for any length of time. For the same reason, if you're using just a dry rub, it's doubly important to cook the meat only briefly and to slice it extra thin to ensure tenderness. Sometimes we let the dry rub sit for a few hours, then follow it with a wet marinade for another couple of hours.

Cook it briefly—If you like your beef cooked on the done side of medium, you may not like what we have to tell you. The quickest way to ruin flank steak is to cook it beyond medium rare. You might as well eat your spare tire as an overcooked flank steak.

There are many ways to cook flank steak. We prefer to grill. Grilling adds another dimension of flavor to the meat, a smokiness you can't get by broiling it. And if there were any sugar products in the marinade, the fire caramelizes the outside just a bit. We love flank steak marinated in some Asian seasonings and cooked over a fire.

We also get great results from searing flank steak in a very hot pan or using it for beef fondue, cooking thin strips of steak in hot oil. Some people like to roll flank steak. Since we're sticking to our guns about not cooking flank steak past medium, it follows that we don't think it should be stuffed. By the time the ingredients inside the roll are adequately cooked, the outside meat will always be well done. The taste of the stuffing just doesn't compensate for the flavor the meat loses in overcooking.

GRILLED MISO-MARINATED FLANK STEAK SALAD

Miso—fermented soybean paste—is available at Asian markets. There are several types, with different colors, flavors, and textures. We suggest that you marinate the meat for three hours, but you can leave it for a lot longer without ill effects. Miso won't break down the meat quickly, so if you need extra time, prepare the marinated meat and the vinaigrette the day before. We garnish this salad with a Japanese rice noodle, deep fried for less than a minute until puffy. We would serve the salad with a bottle of Caymus Conundrum, a blend of four grape varieties. The muscat provides sweetness for the miso, but this wine still has a good acid balance to go with the vinaigrette. *Serves four.*

STEAK AND MARINADE:

- 1 Tbs. dark miso
- 1 Tbs. sugar
- 1 Tbs. mirin (sweet Japanese cooking wine)
- ½ tsp. grated ginger
- ½ tsp. grated garlic
- ½ tsp. sesame oil
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- ¾ lb. flank steak, trimmed

SALAD:

- ½ stalk celery, trimmed
- ½ Japanese cucumber
- ¼ carrot, peeled
- 1 medium tomato
- 1½ tsp. cilantro leaves
- 1½ tsp. mint leaves

VINAIGRETTE:

- ½ tsp. peeled and chopped ginger
- ½ tsp. minced garlic
- Pinch red-chile flakes
- ½ cup rice-wine vinegar
- 2 Tbs. sugar
- 2 Tbs. soy sauce
- 1½ tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1½ tsp. sesame oil
- 2 Tbs. corn oil

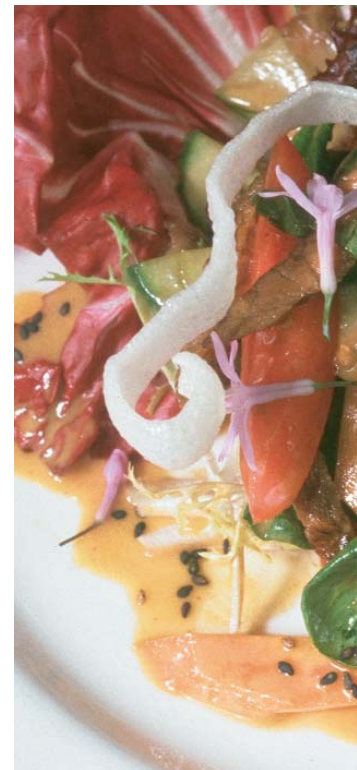
TO FINISH:

- 4 large radicchio leaves
- 1½ cups mixed baby lettuce
- 8 cilantro sprigs
- 2 tsp. sesame seeds
- ½ oz. vermicelli-size rice noodles, deep fried (optional)

Combine the marinade ingredients in a bowl and whisk. Holding the knife at a 30° angle, slice the flank steak across the grain into 4 equal pieces. Pound with a toothed meat mallet to tenderize. Marinate 3 hours. To make the vinaigrette, purée all the ingredients in a blender.

Grill the flank steak until medium rare, about 5 min. total. Slice the cucumber and carrot in half lengthwise, and then cut them and the celery diagonally into pieces ½ in. thick by 3 in. long. (Do not cut the celery in half first.) Cut the tomato into 8 wedges. Slice the steak crosswise into ½-in. strips. Mix the beef and cut vegetables in a large bowl and toss with the vinaigrette.

To assemble, place a radicchio leaf on each plate to form an open cup. Put the lettuce in the radicchio cup and top with the salad. Garnish with cilantro sprigs, a sprinkling of sesame seeds, and the fried rice noodle if desired.



Miso-marinated beef salad makes a light but satisfying meal. Strips of grilled flank steak and raw vegetables are dressed in a sweet, tangy Asian vinaigrette.

CARPACCIO OF BEEF WITH MARINATED CÈPES AND SHAVED PARMESAN

Traditional carpaccio is paper-thin slices of raw beef. We love our version of this dish because searing the flank steak briefly adds a touch of smokiness that's perfect with the Parmesan. Make individual plates or one big plate served family style. If fresh cèpes (also called porcini mushrooms) are unavailable, use shiitake, chanterelle, or oyster mushrooms. Caper berries are the fruit of the same plant whose brined flower buds we eat as capers. Look for caper berries at specialty food shops, but if you can't find them, substitute regular capers. With all the flavor in this dish, we like a wine that has a lot of strength of character but softer tannins, such as a cabernet sauvignon. *Serves four.*



FOR THE CARPACCIO:

2 Tbs. olive oil
¾ lb. flank steak
Salt and pepper

FOR THE CÈPES:

4 oz. cèpes, sliced
½ cup olive oil
1½ tsp. sherry vinegar
¼ tsp. garlic, minced
Salt and pepper

FOR THE GARNISH:

Parmesan
Caper berries

To prepare the steak, heat 2 Tbs. olive oil in a frying pan until it's smoking hot. Season the flank steak, then sear for 1 min. each side. Chill the steak thoroughly. Slice straight down very thin. Arrange on plate and keep cold.

For the mushrooms, clean the pan, and then heat ½ cup oil and sauté the cèpes. Just before they're done, add the garlic and sauté another few seconds. Add the vinegar and season-

ings. Transfer the mixture to bowl and cool.

To assemble, place some mushrooms on the center of the carpaccio. With a vegetable peeler, shave Parmesan on top. Add the caper berries.

PAILLARD OF FLANK STEAK

A paillard is a thin slice of meat that's pounded and then grilled. This is a great dish when you need something quick but satisfying. We all have to rush home occasionally to make a spectacular dinner for two or more. The flank steak and shallot sauce take only a few minutes to prepare and cook. We serve it with crispy french fries. To drink with this meal, we'd choose a big wine that would hold up well with the sauce and french fries, such as a peppery zinfandel. *Serves four.*

FOR THE PAILLARD:

2 lb. flank steak, trimmed
Olive oil

FOR THE SAUCE:

4 Tbs. butter
1 oz. shallots, sliced
1½ tsp. parsley, chopped
1 Tbs. lemon juice



To prepare the steak, hold your knife at a low angle, about 20°, and slice the flank steak across the grain into pieces about ¼ in. thick. You will end up with slices the width of your steak and about 4½ in. long. Pound them with a mallet until they're ⅛ in. thick. Brush with olive oil.

To make the sauce, melt the butter in a frying pan. Add the shallots and sauté until golden brown. Add the parsley and lemon juice, stir, and then remove from heat. Grill the paillards for 30 seconds each side. If serving with french fries, arrange them on each plate first. Then place the paillards, season them with salt and pepper, and pour the sauce over the steak.

Lissa Doumani and her husband, Hiroyoshi Sone, opened Terra in the Napa Valley town of St. Helena, California, in 1988. Doumani describes their food as a blend of southern French and northern Italian with Japanese influences. The couple met at Spago in Los Angeles, where they worked as chefs before opening their own restaurant. ♦

The less it's cooked, the tenderer it will be.

Because flank steak comes from a much-used muscle, it needs careful treatment to keep it from becoming rubbery or flavorless. This variation of carpaccio uses two of the authors' recommendations for preventing toughness: cook flank steak only briefly—in this recipe, hardly at all—and slice it very thin (see recipe, above left).