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Karl Gregg (left) and Allan Bosomworth started Big Lou's Butcher Shop to complement their restaurant. Pieta Woolley photo.

Your friendly local butcher

A new crop of young independent butchers is defying the meat-cutter stereotypes

With a whole pig's leg in one hand and a knife in the other, Sebastian Cortez swiftly peels the animal's white, hairy skin from the muscle and piles it on his butcher block. His artisanal shop, Sebastian & Co Fine Organic Meats (2425 Marine Drive) in West Vancouver, is surgically clean and cold, so there's no smell to this operation whatsoever. In just three minutes, the process is complete: fat for sausages and crackling for roasts set aside, meat loaded into a net for brining and smoking into ham. As with other cutting-edge butchers, the philosophy is nose-to-tail use of the animal: there is no waste.

This is what 34-year-old Cortez does every day for work (and joy), and it's a long way from where he started—as an environmental-engineering student in Chile, destined for a lifetime in an office. A move to Toronto in 1999, an encounter with an encouraging chef, cooking school, and disenchantment with long, late hours on the line as a chef led him to meat. After working on an organic farm and apprenticing in several butcher shops in Toronto, he moved to Vancouver in 2006 and opened Sebastian & Co in 2007.

"It's a lot of work, what we do," he says, his forearms bulging as he slices into the leg. "But there's nothing I don't like. Every day is different. When you do charcuterie, it's like you're doing chemistry. You got to make sure the humidity is right, your amounts of salt are right, also temperatures... And then butchering, frenching, and deboning is almost an artsy thing. You want everything to look really pretty on the display."

Cortez's image of himself as an artist couldn't be further from the modern cultural junk associated with butchery. From the animated short "Lupo the Butcher" to *So I Married an Axe Murderer*, meat-cutting has been portrayed by filmmakers as a job that's attractive to sadists. And in real life, the archetype of the approachable butcher has largely been removed from the understaffed, Styrofoam-and-cellophane isolation of most grocery-store meat departments.

Yet locally, at least four young men are newly at the helm of independent butcher shops—a trend that reimagines the role of the butcher. What unites these butchers is a commitment to enthusiastically connecting their customers with naturally raised, respectfully treated animals.

In the middle of March, for example, Chris Jackson will open a new poultry-only location of Jackson's Meat & Deli on Granville Island. Just 29 years old, he represents the sixth generation of a family of butchers who have carved in Vancouver since 1911 (and in England since 1856). In his younger years, Jackson tried to escape his destiny with a stint managing a bar. His dad, he said, cut off his meat supply to lure him back. After living on a diet of poor cuts, hot dogs, and vegetables, he half-joked, he agreed to take on his birthright.

"I'm really proud of being a butcher, and carrying on the family trade," Jackson told the *Straight* in a phone interview from his store at 2214 West 4th Avenue. "Butchering is almost like therapy, like art. You get to create something, and if you do a good job, someone will see it and buy it. It's rewarding."

But Jackson also noted that, given the cost of retail space in Vancouver, the old-school and artisanal practice of bringing in the whole animal and breaking it down isn't practical. At his store, he said, they bring in parts.

Mechanic Matthew Crawford wrote about this kind of satisfaction in his book *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work*. It's hard to feel pride in office work, he argues, because it has no discernible result; hands-on work (such as fixing motorcycles or carving up a pig) produces "a greater sense of agency and competence", and it's "more engaging intellectually" than shuffling papers or managing other workers.

However, Vancouver's newest meat cutter promises to challenge that. Owners Karl Gregg, 40, and Allan Bosomworth, 35, aren't always elbow-deep in loins, but they're still in the mix at Big Lou's Butcher Shop (269 Powell Street), open since January 3. The duo split their 16-hour

days between running their other business, Two Chefs and a Table, and working alongside lifelong butchers at Big Lou's. Gregg explained during an interview at the shop that the two wanted to open a French-style butcher shop to complement their restaurant, in which each part of the animal could be turned into something delicious by a specialty chef.

The name Big Lou's is a homage to the Salt Spring Island butcher who taught Gregg meat-cutting when he was a teenager. Now, Gregg and Bosomworth continue to learn the trade from their shop's master butcher, Karsten Shellenhas. Formerly with the meat company Freybe, Shellenhas also owns a bison farm in Pemberton and shares his extensive knowledge with the owners, plus in-store butchery apprentice Andy Sedlak.

"We have the executive-chef role, jumping in when we need to," Gregg, a hockey player turned chef, explained. "We hire staff we can learn from, and they can learn from us. It breeds a sort of empowerment that makes them excited about coming to work, and vice versa."

All three of these butcher shops emphasize naturally raised, free-range meat and a genuine relationship with their customers. Plus, unlike butcher shops of old, all three sell a wide selection of non-meat items. Jackson's stocks rubs and sauces, and sells sandwiches. Big Lou's offers house-made rubs (inspired by the owners' UN-like ethnic make-up, which includes heritage from Mexico, China, the Kwakwaka'wakw of Vancouver Island, and Europe), ready-to-eat meat loaf, and other products, as well as sandwiches. Sebastian & Co sells mustards, pastas, sauces, sauerkraut, swank crackers, and other dinner-party fare.

Although these shops are upscale, the young butchers retain that down-to-earth attitude butchers are traditionally known for. Just because Cortez's shop is fancy, for example, doesn't mean he is.

"I take out the garbage, I take out the cardboard, I clean the washrooms," Cortez says. "And I want the staff to do the same, so they learn that respect."

For four young guys with a modern vision for meat, they're selling some old-fashioned values. ♦

FOOD OF THE WEEK

> BY CAROLYN ALI

Just a block from the ICBC driver licensing centre in Point Grey, the Patty Shop (4019 Macdonald Street) is a great detour before or after an appointment. In business for decades, the tiny store makes fresh Jamaican patties on the premises and sells them individually, warm and ready to eat, or frozen by the dozen. The flaky half-moons of pastry (\$1.90 each) come stuffed with a variety of fillings, including mild or hot minced beef, beef curry, chicken, veggies, spinach, and more.