

DISH

Not all butchers are created equal

Meat mongering is hot again, but how do the sausages, burgers and steaks from the new wave of purveyors measure up?

ALEXANDRA GILL

Fire up that backyard grill, because the dwindling art of butchery is suddenly smoking hot. Rising from the ashes of a trade that has languished for decades under supermarket shrink-wrap, a new breed of independent, ethical and enigmatically glamorous butcher is putting the meat back in mongering.

Either tattooed and hip or preternaturally earnest, these young bucks deliver old-fashioned service with a modern emphasis on sustainability. They work directly with small farms, know exactly how the animals have been treated and preen over their handcrafted deli selections.

But can their bespoke meat compete with the diversity of Cioffi's or the sawdust-swept ambience of Beefway? To ferret out the professionals, we questioned the new contenders on the essentials of good butchery from *The River Cottage Meat Book* and assembled a panel of discerning meat lovers to taste-test their finest cuts.

Sebastian & Co. Fine Organic Meats

★★★½

2425 Marine Dr., West Vancouver;
604-925-1636. Sebastianandco.ca

Although not exactly new – the Dunderave shop opened in 2007 – we had to include this unsung Chilean chef because he does everything a great butcher should. By supplying local pasture-raised and organic meat, breaking new ground with such obscure cuts as Argentinean vacio, gearing his business to custom orders, and using whole carcasses to create a dazzling array of charcuterie (from beefy bresaola to pickled pichanga), Sebastian Cortez sets a benchmark for boutique butchery.

» **Sausage:** Layers of heat ripple through hand-cut chorizo (\$9.49 a pound). The panel says: “Nuanced.” “Tight casing.” “Obviously made from scratch.”

» **Burger:** Curry lamb burgers (\$12.99 a pound) are thick and juicy, but noxiously spiced with low-grade garam masala. “Stick to South America.”

» **Steak:** Prime Angus rib eye dry-aged for 40 days (\$27.99 a pound) “coats the mouth in blue-cheese butter.”

Save on Meats ★★½

43 W. Hastings St., Vancouver;
604-569-3568. Saveonmeats.ca

A Gastown Gamble produced one of Vancouver's best butcher shops? This reality show icon doesn't always source locally. The beef is AA or ABF (antibiotic free range) from Alberta. The counter clerks don't sport curlie-cue mustaches. And the concrete space is Spartan (save for the children's coin-operated piggy ride). But head butcher Satoshi Yonemori still carves silk purses out of a non-profit sow's



The steak and sausages at a number of the city's butchers are a cut above the rest. JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

ear (although we don't recommend his gristly pickled trotters).

» **Sausage:** Pork-apple sausage (\$4.96 a pound) has a mellow orchard flavour and fine grind. “Like roast ham with apple sauce,” says the panel.

» **Burger:** Massive bison burgers (\$3.50 each) are full-bodied and surprisingly moist. “Tastes like steak.”

» **Steak:** Marinated ABF Alberta rib eye (\$9.22 a pound) knocks the socks off its much more expensive competitors. While not grass-fed, this “succulent” steak is “wondrously tenderized.”

Pete's Meats

★★★

2817 Arbutus St., Vancouver; 604-730-1661. petes-meat.com

Gregarious, good-looking staff partly compensate for a paltry selection. Owner Peter Jenney has no interest in charcuterie. “That's a whole other art form,” says the 31-year-old cook, who apprenticed at Windsor Meats. If you're the kind of customer who prefers bath chaps and prosciutto to Pok Pok drinking vinegars and Meat Paper magazine, Pete's will seem annoyingly trendy. But we bet you'll be happy to discover that the shop offers a mix of block-ready and whole animal cuts (local, hormone- and antibiotic-free) and will happily source all the oxtail you need with a few days' notice.

» **Sausage:** Lamb merguez (\$8.99 a pound) is “fragrant”

with a “dry rind” and “strong chili hit.” “Tastes like lamb pepperoni.” Chicken chipotle lime (\$7.99 a pound) is loosely stuffed in a “crunchy casing.” “Great flavour combination,” but “not prepared by a professional hand.”

» **Burger:** Chuck and rib eye trim “beef slabs” (\$5.99 a pound) are “pummelled with black pepper.” Perhaps because they're par-frozen, the texture feels “synthetic.” “Might be good in a bun, with lots of mustard.”

» **Steak:** A thick, bone-in rib steak (\$15.99 a pound) is cut to order close to the shoulder with a large tender scallion. “Reminds me of short ribs.” “Ambrosial.”

The Honest Butcher

★★★

3209 W. Broadway St., Vancouver;
604-733-2220. Thehonestbutcher.com

“Happy Animals. Happy People.” That's the motto of this local, sustainable, whole-animal butcher. So what's with the attitude? Looking for a butcher? “You came to a real one,” sneers David Fitzer, a former welder. Will he cut and mince meat to order? “Depends what's available.” Need a bone-in pork butt this weekend? “You have to wait until the next pig comes in.”

» **Sausage:** Lamb merguez (\$12 a pound) mixed with Driftwood Fat Tug IPA disappoints. “Waters.” “Crumbly.” “Frozen?”

» **Burger:** Spring lamb burgers

WEST COAST WINES

Haywire Crush Pad Rosé, Okanagan Valley 3L from \$52 Boxed wine (or bag-in-box, a.k.a. BiB) may conjure images of 80s California hot-tub parties fuelled by Chardonnay. Guilt-ridden, we returned to our corkscrews. But just like screwcap closures, macho packaging with heavy bottles is now being rethought. Consider this fact: An airtight plastic container that packs the equivalent of several bottles in one box makes a fine wine-preserving alternative to glass. Haywire's BiB products (Crush Pad red, white and rosé) are made from Vintner's Quality Alliance juice, but cannot be labelled VQA — only wines in glass bottles can carry that designation. This dry rosé, made entirely from Gamay Noir from Oliver, delivers on flavour as well as value. It's great for summer sipping, especially for large gatherings — perhaps a Canada Day party, where one easy push of the spigot taps into the equivalent of four regular bottles. Will keep for up to six weeks after opening. Available at Legacy Liquor Store, Everything Wine or online www.haywirewinery.com.

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(\$13 a pound) are mild and moist. “The chive is the star.” “So well spiced.”

» **Steak:** Vacio (\$14 a pound) is a lean, deeply beefy flank steak that's typically slow seared over low heat. So it seemed odd when Mr. Ritzer suggested a quick, hot grill. The panel wasn't impressed: “Chewy, fleshy, bloody.” “Like eating my own leg.” “Reminds me of the film *127 Hours*.”

Pasture to Plate

★

1420 Commercial Dr., Vancouver;
604-215-0050. Pasture-to-plate.com

While endearingly crunchy, this East-End butcher is really just a retail outlet for the biodynamic Rafter 25 Ranch in Redstone, B.C., where the animals are lulled to slaughter by the strains of classical music. Being a “self-contained organism,” supply is limited by the natural rhythms of the moon cycle. But the staff here is much more polite when explaining why duck won't be available until fall.

» **Sausage:** Juicy Chicotlin pork (\$10.90 a pound) “tastes like the pig had lots of room to roam around.” Beef (\$10 a pound) is a “proper, tightly packed sausage,” yet “bland.”

» **Burger:** Shank and shoulder beef patties (\$2.75 each) are “dry, lean and healthy.” “On par with Costco.”

» **Steak:** New York strip (\$25.45 a pound) is “pure” with a “pleasant barnyard finish,” but “tough.”