



a matter of meat **hardcore** butchery

Chef-turned-butcher Sebastian Cortez first heard about Vacio steak when he was visiting Chile, where he grew up. A butcher there told him about an intensely flavourful Argentinian cut of steak from the flank. Sebastian fell in love when he tasted it. “It’s one of my favourite cuts,” he says. “It’s best slow-cooked, ideally over hot charcoals that have been blown out.” It’s so flavourful he doesn’t use a marinade; just a pinch of kosher salt.

At the time of his visit to Chile, Sebastian was living in Toronto, where he’d been since 1999. He started out working in a pub and exploring the city’s great variety of ethnic food spots in his spare time. He loved the food culture so much he enrolled in culinary school and went on to work with revered chef Jamie Kennedy. Then he went to Beretta Organic Farm to learn the art of ethical butchering, which includes utilizing the whole carcass of animals raised using humane husbandry practices.

After some time on the farm, he was back in Toronto, as head butcher at the brand-new (and enormously popular) Healthy Butcher. That’s

when he introduced Vacio steak to Toronto, and it caught on in a big way. Soon chefs all over (like Kennedy) were serving it. When he moved to the west coast in 2006, Sebastian brought the Vacio craze with him. Not only that, he helped create a dry-aged steak revival out there.

At first glance, the dry-aged beef hanging in a window behind the counter at Sebastian and Co. Fine Organic Meats (which he and wife Jessica opened in West Vancouver in 2007) looks like a surrealist painting. And if you’ve ever held a piece of dry-aged meat in your hand, you’ll know that even up close it looks like a piece of fine art. But looks aren’t everything: the taste is even more impressive.

“With dry-aging, you lose 1 percent of moisture per day. So there’s a big financial incentive for butchers to wet age,” says Jessica. But dry-aging maximizes tenderness and flavour. After 21 days, the meat doesn’t get any more tender, so many restaurants stop there. “We found that if you go way past that [their taste is 30 to 40 days], it gains a lot more flavour. You can compare it to chicken stock — the

more it’s reduced, the more intense the flavour,” says Sebastian.

When they have guests for dinner and have the option of making anything they want (one glance around their store full of artisan cheeses, condiments, spices, and every cut and kind of meat imaginable, and you’d know I mean anything), Jessica says they usually choose Vacio steak. “Sebastian and the guys gather around the barbeque with a bit of wine, there are kids running around and a few women in the kitchen preparing the pebre, a traditional salsa made of tomato and cilantro with some lime juice, pepper, and/or garlic, just like they do in Chile.”

“In Chile,” Sebastian adds, “for economic reasons, the whole carcass of the animal is used.” For ethical reasons, Sebastian does the same. “I love every aspect of butchery”, he says, “but I especially like educating customers on how to prepare the many different cuts. When I give them cooking advice and they come back and tell me how fantastic it was, that’s the most rewarding part.”