Chef’s Log 23 August 2008

Hereford Rib Chops

OK, for today something apparently pretty simple and pretty basic. A quick trip to Mainline Prime again, and Seth cuts me two ribs off a Choice Hereford Standing Rib Roast. Two bone-in rib eye steaks, sometimes called cowboy steaks. Pretty basic stuff.

There is sort of a story here. This week's food photo shoot started and almost ended on a golf course. Paul Nunes, one of my food mentors and food buddies, took me out for a round of golf in Massachusetts this week. He violated one of my fundamental foodie rules ... he had a hot dog on the course ... After a round in which he shot an amazing triple eagle 0 on the final hole to pull ahead, he took me grocery shopping and bought a rack of lamb, which we grilled, and a rib steak, which we were going to grill the following night. 'twas not to be, as the hot dog nearly killed him during the night.

I left with a craving for the golf victory that had eluded me at the last minute and the rib steak that we froze, since the mere thought of a confronting large lump of meat was enough to turn Paul into ... to drive Paul to ... well ... no ... we don't need to go there.

So, after a couple of days at home, the siren song of derek's main line prime made me think of trying an on-the-bone rib steak. I tried something slightly different ... Not Charolais Dry Aged Prime Strip, but a simpler, more basic, cut from another heritage breed. Hereford is tasty. I wouldn’t want to describe this is too much detail to a vegetarian, but this is what beef tastes like in a carnivore’s dream. Basic, sure, but also good stuff. It’s also significantly less expensive ... which, of course, seduced me into buying for more than three people could possibly eat.

The steaks come home, get rubbed with my own Cajun rub, and then get really blackened, about 12 minutes to a side, still quite rare; not Pittsburgh raw or cold, but definitely rare.
What do you serve with steaks like this? I didn’t realize quite how massive they were until they came off the grill! There is room on the plate only for a small scoop of rice. A serving of a simple Greek salad, European cucumbers, fresh tomatoes, a little feta, a few olives, and some olive oil and oregano in one little bowl, a little bit of coleslaw in another little bowl. The steaks really did seem magnificent, so the dinner seemed to call out for something special, so I opened a 1986 Cos d’Estournel. A perfect match.

This really was lovely, but it also really impossible to finish in a single sitting. A steer chop, apparently, is somewhat larger than a pork chop! But we do a fine job finishing the bottle of wine.
What can we do with the leftovers? I guess we can try again, the following night ... But with similar results. Again, the steaks are too large and again we are defeated. Once again we do a pretty good job finishing of the wine, this time a Billecart-Salmon rose Champagne.

Eventually we do beat the remains of the steak into submission, with another Greek Salad and a bottle of surprisingly good beer, an Ithaca Beer Company White Gold with surprisingly complex flavors, including classic Saaz hopping combined with Belgian Trappist yeast and an unanticipated touch of funky Brett. A memorable use of two rib steaks!
So what are our takeaways from this adventure?

1. This really is a better steak than I have ever been able to buy in a restaurant. The beef itself is more flavorful, and the combination of the beef, the charring, the spice, and the wood smoke is perfect. Yes, I can also get a better steak by starting with dry aged Charolais, but then I’m starting with a better steak and with a more expensive steak; all I have to do is avoid ruining it. Here the trick is the preparation.

2. Don’t forget to put the rub on thick and hot and spicy, and then don’t forget to really burn it. The flavor penetrates deeply, but not into the center of the steak, which still tastes of rare beef, and the burning takes much of the hot bite out of the Cajun rub.

3. It helps to be able to heat your grill up to about 500 degrees before you put the steaks on, even if the steaks are this thick, and then to drop the flame significantly. You want to char the steaks, which takes an open flame, but you want the grill hot or steaks this thick will never cook before incinerating from the direct flame.

4. Smoking over wood chips from old Jack Daniels barrels adds a certain charm.

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