Making ends meat

How whole beast butchery and off-cuts can make your profit margins more than the sum of its parts.

By Leslie Wu

Every time chef Derek MacGregor takes a knife to a lamb carcass, he's instantly brought back to the memory of how he learned to butcher.

"When I lived in Toronto, my father would drive up a whole lamb and drop it off at my one bedroom apartment in High Park," laughs MacGregor, now chef and co-owner of Le Chien Noir in Kingston. "I'd figure it out on my own for my home freezer, and the first couple, I wouldn't want to show my chefs today."

Tied in part to increased consumer interest into the origins of their food, as well as major meat recalls making mainstream press, there's a spotlight on the mechanics of butchery in a way foodservice hasn't seen for decades.

Chefs are creating more opportunities to incorporate whole beast butchering into their kitchens, using the entire animal in creative ways as a point of menu differentiation.

When it comes to translating those off-cuts into dollars and cents in a commercial kitchen, however, operators need to have more than knowledge of butcher charts in their toolkit.

ORN talked to butchers, chefs and manufacturers/processors to see how some operators are going a cut above when it comes to lamb, beef and pork.

"From a chef's perspective, it's really gratifying to get a whole animal and break it down," says Scott Vivian of Toronto's Beast Restaurant. "There's the sustainability factor in that you're not letting anything go to waste. But as an operator, it makes sense cost wise: it raises labour costs a little bit, but the actual cost of meat goes way down, as long as you know what you're doing."

The chef and co-owner of the 34-seat restaurant says that as long as the potential for higher than average labour costs are built into your business plan, the whole beast butchery model can be a profitable one.

"In Toronto, there's such a fast-growing restaurant culture that you have to offer something that sets you apart," says Vivian. "You have to look at it from a long term perspective."

For some chefs, the butchery itself holds its own appeal. "I love the challenge of what to do with the whole animal," says MacGregor. "If I'm smart and use every bit of a lamb carcass, I can turn that into $1,100 or $1,200. On the bones alone, if I roast them, clarify the stock and use it as consommé with some added vegetables, I can sell it for $8 per bowl for 30 or 40 bowls."

There's movement towards using the whole animal and restaurants have done a great job leveraging that unique proposition, says Jamie Cooney, chief executive officer of Rowe Farms.

"It's better for the planet, the animals, and the chefs because there's less waste," he says.

Off the beaten track

So a whole animal has landed with a thump in your walk in. Although the temptation may be to focus on the traditional money makers such as the prime cuts, there's a wealth of revenue generators to be explored.

Five years ago, off-cuts would have been used by processing plants for ground meat, says Cooney. "Now, they're saved and sold as separate items for a price a lot higher than ground."

Sam Gundy, co-owner of butcher shop Olliffe in Toronto thinks that this rush towards tertiary cuts can be attributed in part to the fact that meat costs are rising across the board. "In restaurants, the protein is one of the most important parts of the plate," he says. "But due to the expense of primal cuts, such as strips, ribeyes and tenderloins, it's hard to make a margin off a high cost. People are also using more of the animal, getting more cuts out and grinding less."

Apart from cost, other factors come into play when looking at off-cuts, one of which may be simple ennui on the part of the diner as well as the chef.

Diners are looking more for cuts that are rustic and traditionally viewed as cheaper, such as shank, brisket and flanks, says Alessandro Girimonte, sales and marketing director of Meaty Meats. "You couldn't sell those cuts to people at one time." Girimonte sees this trend as part of a greater societal shift where consumers are no longer just looking for major brands, with travel and boredom with the traditional being major factors. "Everyone's gone through the gamut of cuts. It's like trying to find a cheap house in Toronto – everyone's trying to find an undiscovered neighbourhood," says Peter Sanagan, proprietor of Toronto-based Sanagan's Meat Locker and a former chef.

Social responsibility in younger demographics is also playing a part in the meat choices of diners. "If you say, 'let's not put things to waste', that argument resonates with younger diners," says Girimonte. "With this under-45 age bracket, it makes sense that operators can use more off-cuts to boost their bottom line."

Sometimes, trends like the proliferation of tacos and terrines can drive the demand for specific cuts of meat. "Flank steak is insanely popular right now," says Michael McKenzie, president of Tichdale, ON-based Seed to Sausage. "Chefs are saying it's their favourite piece of meat. It's in part due to the popularity of tacos and the increased usage of meats that were once considered more neglected in things like terrines, which are showing up on menus everywhere."

Organ meats, hearts, kidney, livers and tongues are a lot more prevalent, taking the place of more traditionally popular cuts says Steve Mitton, chef and owner of Ottawa's Murray Street. "Talking to my beef farmer, I'll ask him what he has left over to get rid of and it's usually striploins," he laughs.

There's also a certain level of showmanship with using offal and off-cuts. "Those cuts are time consuming and need skill to make them taste good. There are a lot of chefs trying to be different and break away from the beef tenderloin and chicken breast mold," says Sanagan.

Organ meats have always flown under the radar with the diner in the sense that there was only a specific group that would eat them, says Vince Girimonte, chief operating officer of Meaty Meats and a fourth-generation butcher. "It's all about how you prepare them as an operator. You only have a few chances to make it a hit, because if you make it wrong, customers won't order it again."

Jennifer McLagan, chef and author of *Odd Bits: How to cook the rest of the animal*, says we need to give these off-cuts more prestige, an idea that is gradually taking form across the country. "In North America, meat is still relatively cheap, and since prime cuts are easier to cook, we focus on them and give them more priority," she says. "In Europe, when I went to buy meat, I came to realize how expensive it is in the rest of the world."

She points to how this change has come about with a generational shift in North America, and how buffalo tongues and prairie oysters weren't verboten as they are today. "It's not like we didn't eat all these dishes. Chefs like Fergus Henderson made all these dishes popular again. If you look at the *Joy of Cooking* from 30 years ago, there are recipes for liver, kidneys, and cockscombs in it."

Some diners today, however, view many offal cuts as a novelty, and are excited to try different things. "For a lot of people, eating brains, testicles or tripe is new and exciting," says McLagan.

Want to try it? Here's how:

Animal cheeks used to be cuts that were relatively hard to get, says McLagan, who remembers that when she worked in a restaurant kitchen, she had to order them in a 50-lb-box. "Something like a beef cheek makes a fabulous sauce," she says. "It adds collagen, and doesn't shred or break down when you cook it for a long time."

"You don't see a lot of people using ***kidneys***, but rabbit or lamb kidneys are delicious," says Mitton, although he cautions that some could be turned off by the cleaning aspect of the task with lamb kidneys, which have to be clipped out on the inside to make it look appealing. "If you get a little caramelization on the outside but a rose colour inside, it's tender and delicious," he says. Mitton uses rabbit kidneys with rabbit heart to make an intense sauce, or serves it on toast with mushrooms, brandy and cream.

Portion size is important, and using offal doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing experience. "You can make a kebab with animal ***heart*** and serve it with other types of meat on a plate, or even use ground heart to add to hamburger, which gives it a delicious meatiness and can introduce people to that type of meat," says McLagan.

Offal can be used to enhance the diner's experience, but you need to balance the menu and use small portions, says Vivian. "After a while, with too much offal, you can run into too many iron-like flavours."

With veal ***brains***, MacGregor prefers to pan sear them, then slow cook them. "They have a mild meaty texture with a great crispiness on the outside and creaminess inside," he says.

Making an item like brain into ravioli (McLagan says brains have a whipped cream texture when cooked) and putting it on a plate with other types of ravioli can make for an easier choice for the diner. "You can call it a trio of house-made ravioli, and one of those happens to be brain," says McLagan. "You're not lying, and people have something else on that plate that they might be more willing to order."

The ubiquitous taco is another way to incorporate heart or tongue into a menu that is familiar to the diner. "Heart and tongue are two things that are cheap and relatively easy to cook. Heart has to be cooked either quickly or slowly, and can be added to a stir fry or made into a stroganoff," says McLagan.

Heart can also be used to make tartare ("it chops up all tender and becomes intensely beefy and delicious") or can be braised or stewed, rather than serving the whole heart on a plate, says McLagan.

Beef heart is definitely quite popular now with chefs, says Gundy, who has it as part of his regular inventory at Olliffe due to demand.

Since ***tongue*** is a big muscle, it makes terrific tacos or corned beef, says McLagan, who also recommends grilling it on a barbecue or putting it into a croque monsieur. "Victorians used to nail the tongue to a board to keep its shape," she says. "But once it's cooked and the skin is taken off, it's smooth and creamy and just looks like other pieces of meat."

MacGregor pays $1.50 per pound for tongue to make his own pastrami: brined, cured and steamed over beer for four hours. "There's a lot of collagen in tongue, and it's got a great fatty feel to it," says MacGregor, who puts it on his menu in a sandwich.

Prairie oysters can also be a delicacy, says McLagan. "I love testicles," she says. "Lamb testicles are very mild, with a fabulous mousse-like texture similar to a fish quenelle." She recommends poaching and frying them in sauce or with breadcrumbs. Union restaurant in Toronto has lamb testicles on its menu that are braised, and then fried, as part of its mixed grill plate, which proved to be a popular choice for diners. "It just flew out of the kitchen when we added it to the menu," said chef Teo Paul.

Sweetbreads have to be prepared and served quite quickly. "Sweetbreads are still cheap, but they haven't really made a comeback as much as they should," says Paul.

Although ***ears*** are often fried crisp to use as a garnish, MacGregor simmers them for 24 hours for a terrine, layered with leeks and herbs and put in the fridge for four hours. "The ears have enough gelatin to set the terrine into a block filled with rich, porky goodness," he says.

Feet can be simmered down to pick the meat off for ragout, as can neck and jowls, says MacGregor. Pork hocks and ears are gaining in popularity due to a changing multicultural demographic, says Vince Girimonte, especially with West Indian and Caribbean diners.

Don't forget about ***blood***, says McLagan. Although sweet preparations, such as chef Rob Gentile's blood chocolate custard dessert at Buca, are becoming popular, savoury dishes are also natural applications.

"Just think of blood like egg yolks…it works the same way," says McLagan. "It coagulates and can be used to set something, and like eggs, it'll separate and curdle if it goes too far." A spoonful of blood can be used to thicken a sauce as well.

"Often, diners can think that they don't like these things, but it's no weirder to eat a cow's ears than a cow bottom, when you think about it," says McLagan. "If you work with them regularly, it's not more squeamish to work with lungs than tenderloin – it's still meat. You need to know what it looks like and how it cooks. It's the same with any cut of meat. If you can cook a shank, you can cook a cheek, oxtail or neck."

Meat mindset

Whole animal butchery at a restaurant requires a certain mindset. At Richmond Station, Carl Heinrich and Ryan Donovan let the ingredients drive the menu and have a precise system that they put into place to deal with the challenges of whole beast butchering. "At our previous restaurant, Marben, we used to change the whole menu every day and reprint every day. If we had pig, we had 40 servings of pork tenderloin and the next day, we wouldn't have any pork," says Donovan. "We weren't going to go out and buy a new pig." Butchering in house represents a shift from when the animal was broken down by a butcher in isolation to a more collaborative effort between butcher and chef (in some cases, this is the same person), says Donovan.

Vivian features whole beast dinners at his restaurant, which allows a certain flexibility, but also requires some ingenuity in dealing with leftovers. "At the end of the day, you have to think that with a side of beef, you're only getting one of each of the prime cuts and that goes fast, especially with shrinkage," says Vivian. "You end up with a lot of flap cuts."

MacGregor, who has 65 seats inside and 60 on the patio at Le Chien Noir in the summer, uses the whole beast butchery primarily for features, but does have to bring in some meat to deal with regular menu items, such as lamb. "No local farmer can slaughter 20 lambs per week to sell me 50 racks, and what would I do with 20 sheep worth of off-bits?" he says. "120 seats in the summer does become a big operation. One lamb doesn't even last the weekend…I have to buy two or three if I'm doing it all weekend."

Tips for selecting meat

Overall, selecting meat is like judging the animal when it's alive, says MacGregor. "Look at the hip and shoulder joints: are they nicely covered with meat or are the bones protruding?" he says.

In terms of visual cues, Vivian looks for the telltale slashes inspectors make with knives when looking at meat, as a quick way of checking that this was done.

Although colour is often used as a first visual indicator, beware of using colour as the sole guide to selecting meat, cautions Vince Girimonte. "Colour is not everything. It can be very deceiving," he says. "If two pieces of beef touch, for example, they can change colour very easily. But also beware if beef looks overly red."

Pay attention to other factors, including smell. "It should smell like it tastes," says Girimonte. "Beware of anything that's a bit sour. Good meat smells really good."

Like many aspects of foodservice, supplier relationships are vital. "With beef, work with your supplier to see which kind of aging works with the flavour profile you're looking for," says Vivian.

Age on the beef can be seen in its dryness: it gets a little darker, and starts to rot on the outside surface, but shouldn't be dried out or purple. "Steer clear if it looks wet on the surface," Sanagan warns.

In terms of fat content, this can be a personal choice with chefs: some prefer almost Kobe-style levels of marbling, while others prefer leaner meats. Sanagan doesn't really care for heavily marbled, 40 per cent fat on beef; he says he just wants enough to keep the meat moist.

With pork, Vivian prefers heritage breeds with a deep colour. "If you look at a piece of raw meat, all you should be able to think of is eating it, and imagining how good it's going to be cooked," says Vivian.

Consider a certain thickness and firmness when selecting pork belly. "If you hold it out raw, it should have a slight droop, but not be flabby," says McKenzie.

In terms of feel with pork, Vivian wants some bounceback and nothing too soft. "With the muscles, you want something that's got a nice firm texture. Also, take a look at the fat cap: it should be nice and white and in proportion to the meat," he says.

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Social meatia

When MacGregor received a delivery of a whole Pacific red wild salmon, his customers were the first ones to know about it. Le Chien Noir employs a social media consultant, who took a picture of the fish and posted it on Twitter and Facebook, along with the name of the fisherman that caught it, the captain of the boat, and a Google map with a dot pinpointing where the fish was caught. "People do want to know where there food comes from, and customers can see where it was caught and when," says MacGregor.

The salmon, which cost MacGregor $530, became 48 entrees at $30 a piece and 14 appetizers at $12 each – mainly from the belly of the fish – totalling $1608 and a 32 per cent food cost. The restaurant cleared the salmon in two and a half dinner services because the tweets and posts drew in diners. "It's a lot faster than we would clear a generic salmon. There's no way that we would sell that number of pan-seared farmed salmon in three nights. It was because we were boasting that it was wild, who caught it and where…and customers responded," he says.

MacGregor does a similar thing when farmers send pictures of cows in the pasture. "We retweet it to our followers and it's a win-win. It puts the spotlight on the local farmers, and the returns that we're seeing on that is great," he says.

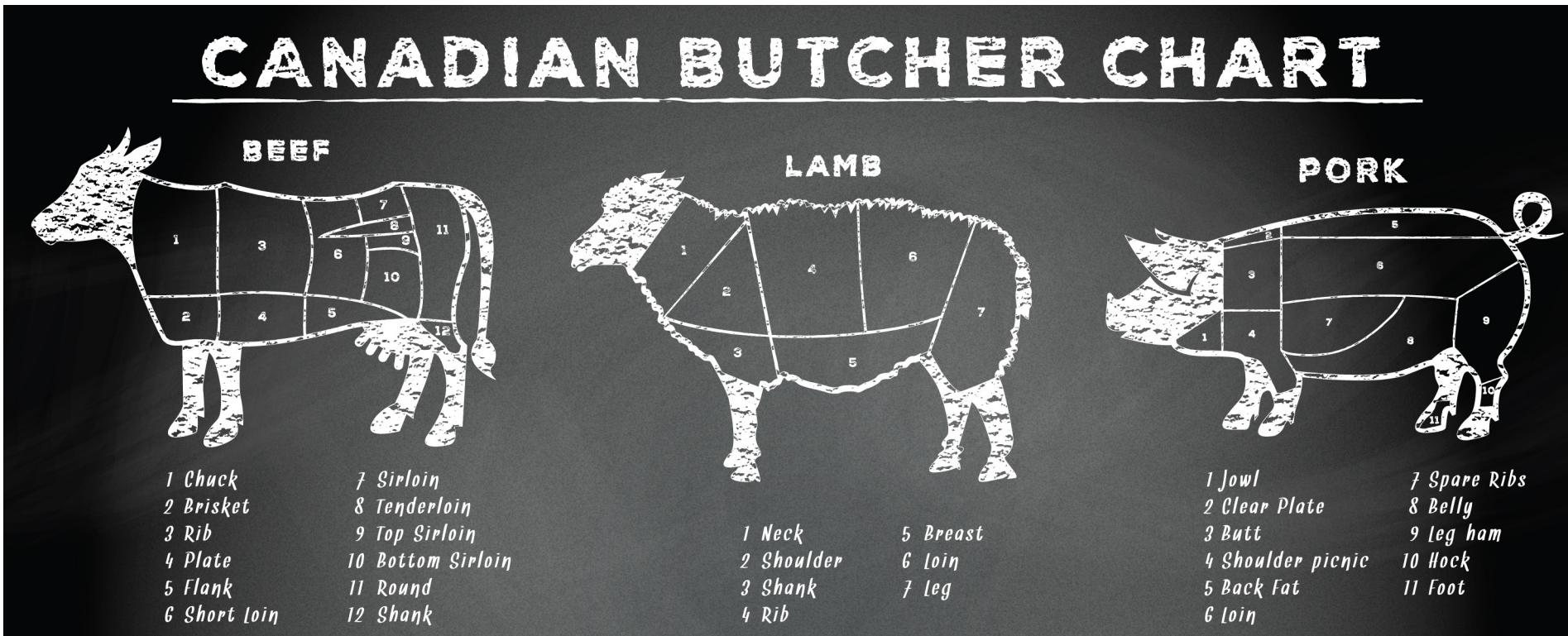
Prime your staff

One of the benefits of in-house butchering is the opportunity to train staff. "At any given time, there's a chef we consider to be a peer in our kitchen coming to learn about what we do," says Heinrich. He and Donovan host young cooks from not only outside their kitchen, but those from within their own ranks who want to set aside a piece of meat to work with.

It's not just the kitchen staff, but also the front of house that can benefit from in-house butchering. MacGregor gathers his cooks and servers around when butchering.

"The sheep, pig and cow are pretty much anatomically the same, with different terminology," says MacGregor. "Our servers can talk about where a New York strip comes from, or relate a lamb chop with the bone in to a T-bone steak. The front of house staff is trained as to where cuts come from, which have more fat, muscles and why some have more flavour."

Staff education is also a crucial step in ensuring the diner buys into your concept. "You have to train your staff because they have to be able to describe these items to the customer," says Vivian. "In a restaurant like Beast, I don't get the opportunity to come out to talk to the guest as much as I'd like, so the front of house staff is extremely important as the point of contact."



Meat breakdown:

How operators use a whole animal for their menus.

For Scott Vivian, Beast Restaurant, one pig equalled:

Head: whole roasted for a special dinner item for a group or braised to use for terrine or charcuterie.
Shoulders: roasted or braised for the menu's ever changing gnocchi poutine.
Heart, tongue and other innards: used for the restaurant's "pig board", grilled first and submerged in liquid to hold, then served cold and rare, after it soaks in the marinade flavours.
Belly: smoked, then brined for bacon for brunch.
Loin: after ribs are removed, used to make peameal bacon for brunch. If there's a whole animal dinner, Vivian uses the legs for one of the dishes.
Legs: can be used as charcuterie.
Trim and other meat taken off the bone: can become grind used for sausage gravy or dirty rice balls.
Bones: used for stock.
Tail: used as part of a whole animal dinner, or vacuum packed and frozen until enough have accumulated for a special.
Trotters: boiled with the head for head cheese (the sticky collagen helps the liquid set the terrine).
Hocks: braised and shredded off the bone, then compressed and tossed in corn starch to make it crispy. Served with house-made kimchi.
Ears: accumulated for crispy garnish.

For Steve Mitton, Murray Street, one Rideau Arcott lamb equalled:

Tongues: collected until there's a sufficient quantity. "They're not going to make much of a plate, but can be braised for appetizers."
Heart: chopped for tartare.
Kidneys: devilled or served with cream sauce.
Liver: liver parfait, fried with bacon for liver and onions. (Mitton asks his farmers to wait until the lambs are a bit older before slaughter so that they will have larger livers.)
Loins: usually marinated to have on hand if he's stuck for a main dish. "Most of our plates aren't a la minute, but stewed, braised, or used for confit."
Belly: smoked for lamb bacon.
Trim: used for ground to make chorizo.
Shoulders: smoke cured, then braised.
Legs: reserved for a la minute because they're "super tender" or marinated like loin in herb oil to make gyros for sandwiches.
Lard: rendered out and used for baking lamb biscuits to be served with a loin dish.
Neck and shank: confit used for rillettes and gnocchi.

Photos: Pg. 10: Pig's head and knives photos courtesy of Leigh Beisch, from Jennifer McLagan's *Odd Bits* cookbook, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. Pg. 11: Above: Carl Heinrich butchering a pig at Richmond Station. Right: Shanks photo courtesy of Leigh Beisch, from *Odd Bits*. Pg. 12: Meat Math photo by Mike Kennedy.

MEAT MATH

For Derek MacGregor, Le Chien Noir, one lamb accounted for:

Overall cost: $280 for a 60 lb. lamb, cut in half.
Racks: cut into chops. Four 10 oz. racks, sold at $35 each.
Loins: using a bone saw, cut into 6 oz. chops, sold at $32 each.
Legs: cut into one-inch steaks, as opposed to doing a roast. Five steaks off each leg, sold at $32.
Shoulders: MacGregor splits what he does with the shoulders. The first one: deboned completely, put through the grinder to make 12 sausages, sold at $16 for lunch serving.

The second shoulder: slow braised and all the meat picked off to make lamb and goat cheese ravioli as an appetizer feature, with four or five pieces per serving. Eight to 10 orders, sold for $13.
Belly: Used for charcuterie plates, such as lamb bacon (brined, dried, and put into the smoker for half a day). Used to garnish salads, such as the house Caesar.
Bones: used to make lamb stock. Some of it is reduced to make sauce to accompany the racks and steaks. Makes lamb, mushroom and barley soup (almost 8 gal.), with an 8 oz. serving sold for $8.
Shanks: braised and meat picked to put into soup.
Labour: Under one hour.

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If the belly is cut open, look at the opening and pinch the belly, says MacGregor. "It gives you an idea of how thick it is, and you can check the cross section for the fat to meat ratio."

With lamb, if you can see the head, check if the eyes are cloudy, says Gundy, who also advises to avoid meat that is overly purple because it will be livery and tough.

Look for a bright, pinkish hue, and a sweet smell, like lanolin, advises Sanagan.

Looking at labour

At Union restaurant, head chef Ross Goodall has a unique advantage: he can stop by the restaurant's recently launched butcher shop next door, Côte de Boeuf. "We were doing a lot of butchery in the basement of the restaurant and the space next door," said chef/owner Teo Paul. "Now, we bring the whole animal into the shop, break it down and then source the meat for the restaurant that way." Paul brings in a whole cow, pig and a few lambs every week for Goodall's private supermarket, as well as retail and some wholesale.

For those chefs without such an advantageous setup, one of the chief concerns with in-house, whole beast butchering is labour cost. "I don't think that labour is as big an issue as some chefs think," says MacGregor, who estimates that it takes, for a 60 lb. lamb, cut down to its primals with its bones removed, about 40 minutes. "The biggest thing for some chefs is the intimidation factor," he says, especially if they are teaching junior staff. "They think 'I bought that pig that cost $300, what if I screw it up?' To which I say, it's pork, you can't really screw it up. It can always be salvaged."

When teaching young chefs to filet salmon or butcher meat, for example, if they put a nick into the filet, MacGregor turns it into tartare or, if worse come to worst, "there's always stew," he laughs.

Ultimately, the payoff for whole beast butchering manifests itself in different forms, depending on the chef. For some, in-house breakdowns of animals reinforce the notion of made from scratch that offers branding for operators, says Cooney. "It's a great point of differentiation, and in such a competitive world, something that the restaurateur needs to consider."

For others, it's recognition of both the value and opportunities that come with butchering the whole animal. "Chefs and restaurateurs are looking for ways to offer things that are unique, such as the bavette cut—things that might be under-utilized but are very versatile in terms of cost and serving," says Vivian. "There are restaurants that are set up to serve filet mignon, and then there are restaurants like us that use off-bits."

Whether the decision is made for financial or creative reasons, whole beast, in-house butchery is a way for a new breed of chef to make their bones.

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