

# Britain's best steak

Buying British couldn't have a better advertisement than the results of Country Life's beef-tasting session, which reveals the best breed for steak. Caroline Cranbrook explains why meat from our traditional native cattle breeds is the best in the world

COUNTRY LIFE'S British beef tasting session was a celebration of a unique heritage. Every piece of meat we judged was delicious and a telling advertisement for our traditional British breeds, as well as the traditional methods used to rear them. It was a difficult but enjoyable task.

There are a number of reasons why beef produced from British breeds is exceptional. First, our cattle—and, indeed, sheep—spend most of their lives out of doors, feeding on a diet of grass, grass products and a limited amount of concentrates, often homegrown. Research suggests (and diners know) that grass-fed beef tastes better. Traditional breeds also have increased marbling of fat, which melts into the meat during cooking and gives it a better flavour. Treatment at slaughter is another factor. If animals are stressed before slaughter, the meat becomes tough. Short journeys to the local abattoir equal less stress for the animal, fewer 'food miles' and better meat. Likewise, proper maturing is vital, and all the contestants' beef had been hung on the bone for at least two to three weeks before we tried it. This contrasts to animals destined for supermarkets, which often travel long distances to slaughter; very little of their meat is hung and treated with the care it receives at the smaller meat plants and

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butchers. Another argument in Britain's favour is that animals reared extensively on grass produce less methane (a greenhouse gas) and don't require the same amount of concentrates, which have both an economic and an environmental cost.

Our grazing livestock provide us with wonderful meat, but they have a much wider significance. They are the guardians of our landscape. The mosaics of small fields, downland, heathland, fells, salt-marshes and most of our wildlife reserves all have to be grazed to maintain their beauty and biodiversity. Without livestock, they would

revert either to arable cultivation or become abandoned thickets.

Livestock are at the heart of the local food economy. It's almost impossible to run a farm shop or farmer's market without a local meat supply. Butchers rely on the superior quality of the meat they sell to differentiate themselves from the majority of supermarkets, and they are often the only independent shops left in our market towns. Pubs and restaurants also rely on quality local meat.

Although much of our food heritage has disappeared, we still have our traditional British meat. But even that is under threat—from supermarket pressure for greater uniformity of product, which is geared to the size of supermarket packaging, from the burden of increasing costs and from the increasing regulation which affects farmers, abattoirs and butchers.

In these difficult economic times, we can play a very real part in guaranteeing the survival of our British breeds, our local food economies, our landscape and our countryside—by buying British beef. When you eat out or go shopping, ask where the meat came from and the name of the breed. If you can, buy it from your butcher, who can give you expert advice. By doing this, we all can make a difference—and eat very well indeed.

## The best steak in Britain

### How we did it

GENEROUS local producers supplied us with steaks (sirloin on the bone, and fillet) from Britain's native cattle breeds—for more information, visit [www.tbmm.co.uk](http://www.tbmm.co.uk)

### Where

THE STEAKS were cooked by staff at the Hix Oyster & Chop House, London EC1 ([www.hixoyesterandchophouse.co.uk](http://www.hixoyesterandchophouse.co.uk))

### Who

JUDGES were: The Countess of Cranbrook (campaigner for local food), Mark Price (chief executive of Waitrose), Richard Lutwyche (Traditional Breeds Meat Marketing), Mark Hix (award-winning restaurateur), Fergus Henderson (founder of the St John's restaurant), Jack O'Shea (butcher), Carla Carlisle (COUNTRY LIFE columnist and farmer), Mark Hedges (Editor), Rebecca Pearson (Features Editor) and Flora Birtles (Features Assistant)

Charlita Hopkinson



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**Above** Made to make your mouth water: a perfectly cooked succulent British steak. Beef from our native cattle breeds is the best in the world

## The winner: The Longhorn

THE LONGHORN (*right*), which originated from Craven, northern England, became popular in the 18th century when Robert Bakewell used selective breeding methods to refine it. Longhorns are docile, able to calve easily and renowned for longevity. Our steak came from an animal fed only on ancient pasture in Lincolnshire. The animal was 20 months old and the carcass hung for 2½ weeks. Longhorn beef has long been praised by chef Heston Blumenthal.

### *Judges' verdict*

'Definitely the winner; delicious'  
**Carla Carlisle**

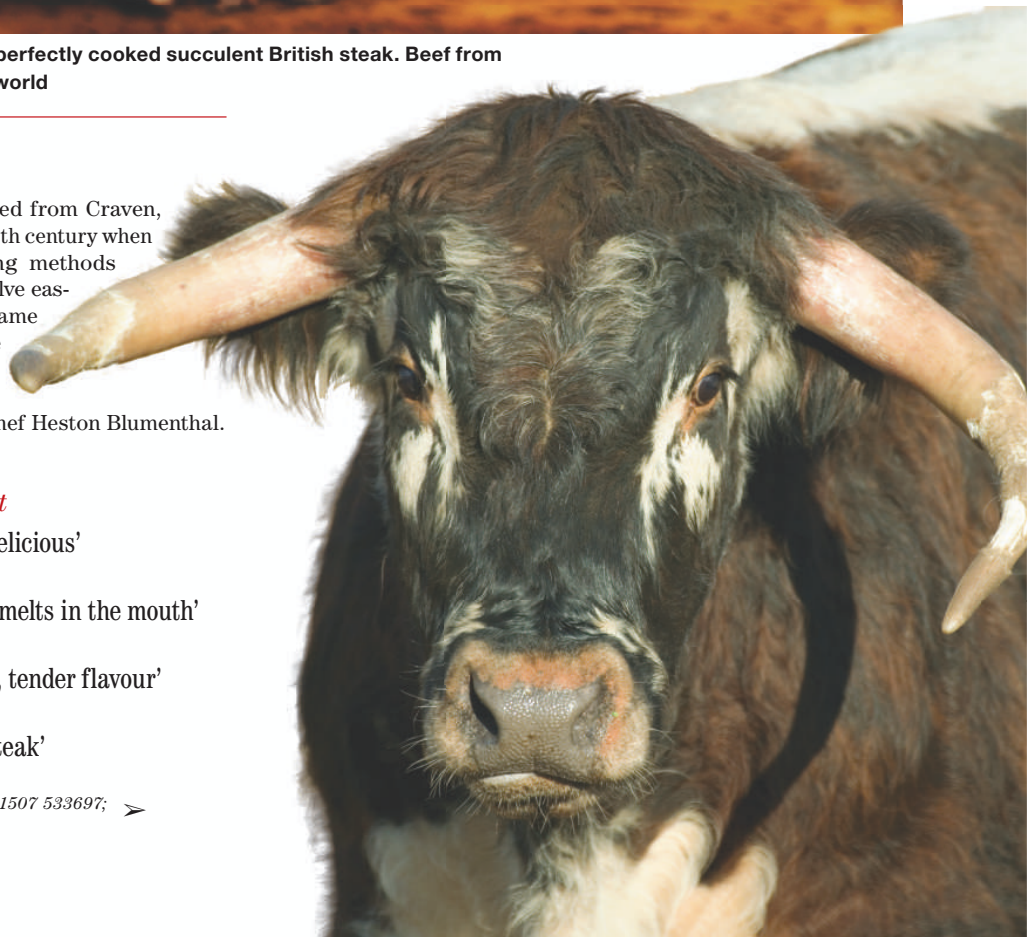
'Perfect, 9 out of 10; very sweet and melts in the mouth'  
**Mark Price**

'Soft on the palate, with a sweet, tender flavour'  
**Jack O'Shea**

'This is the perfect steak'  
**Mark Hedges**

Meat supplied by Meridian Meats, Lincolnshire (01507 533697; [www.meridianmeatshop.co.uk](http://www.meridianmeatshop.co.uk)) ➤

[www.countrylife.co.uk](http://www.countrylife.co.uk)



# We are the champions

How did our judges rate the taste of the British breeds?



**Aberdeen Angus**

HARDY, low maintenance, adaptable cattle used for meat and vegetation management. The pure Aberdeen Angus is listed as critical by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST).

**Judges' verdict**

'This is beautiful, pure beef and you can get slightly more flavour from over-cooking it'

**Mark Hix**

'Every restaurant in London has it, but is it pure Aberdeen Angus?'

**Jack O'Shea**

*Dovecote Park, supplier to Waitrose (www.dovecotepark.co.uk)*



**British White**

AN ECONOMICALLY efficient breed that can thrive on very poor pasture.

**Judges' verdict**

'Combination of great texture and taste, soft and tender'

**Mark Price**

'A heavy grain, and the flavour isn't bad'

**Mark Hix**

*Weeton's of Harrogate, Yorkshire (01423 507100; www.weetons.com)*



**Dexter**

THE SMALLEST European cattle breed (it comes from south-west Ireland), it's about half of the size of a traditional Hereford. Dexters were considered a rare breed, but are now categorised as recovering.

**Judges' verdict**

'Intense, almost gamey flavour'

**Mark Hix**

'Like a VW, does its job brilliantly'

**Jack O'Shea**

'My favourite'

**Rebecca Pearson**

*Pike End Farm, Sowerby Bridge, West Yorkshire (01422 823949; www.pikeendfarm.net)*



**2nd**

**Beef Shorthorn** (2nd in our tasting)

THE BREED has evolved over the past two centuries, from Teeswater and Durham cattle. It's usually reared naturally and produces beautifully marbled beef.

**Judges' verdict**

'My critical faculties are a little blunted because I just think it's delicious'

**Carla Carlisle**

'A very good lingering flavour'

**Mark Hedges**

'Needs more fat on it'

**Caroline Cranbrook**

*Browns of Stagsden, Bedfordshire (01234 822330; www.brownsstagsden.co.uk)*



**3rd**

**Hereford** (3rd in our tasting)

AN ECONOMIC and versatile breed, the Hereford produces more valuable meat per acre of grassland than any other.

**Judges' verdict**

'The Rolls-Royce of today; very moist, lovely texture'

**Richard Lutwyche**

'Very welcoming'

**Carla Carlisle**

'I hate to say it, but I prefer this to my usual Aberdeen Angus'

**Jack O'Shea**

*Llandinabo Farm Shop, Ledbury, Herefordshire (01531 632744; www.llandinabofarmshop.co.uk)*



**Belted Galloway**

ITS EXACT ORIGIN is unknown, but it's thought to come from cross-breeding with Dutch belted cattle. In 2007, the 'Belt' was formally removed from the RBST's watchlist.

**Judges' verdict**

'Flavour combined with juices and satisfaction'

**Fergus Henderson**

*The Butts Farm Shop, South Cerney, Gloucestershire (01285 862224; www.thebuttsfarmshop.com)*



**Highland**

ANCIENT AND HARDY breed from western Scotland, also known as Hairy or Heilan Coo, which has been widely exported.

**Judges' verdict:**

'It has a great colour and is deliciously tender. Great, old-school beef'

**Jack O'Shea**

*Lochcarron Butchers, Lochcarron, Wester Ross (01520 722229; www.highlandcattlesociety.com)*



**Gloucester**

DUAL-PURPOSE BREED, which is good for milk production and is exceptionally docile. The RBST lists it as at risk.

**Judges' verdict**

'A juicy, rich roast beef'

**Carla Carlisle**

'A little like cardboard for me'

**Mark Hix**

*Gurney's Butchers, Over Farm, Gloucestershire (01452 520311; www.over-farm-market.com)*



**White Park**

BRITAIN'S OLDEST native breed, listed as at risk by the RBST. Rustic, adaptable and attractive, it's renowned for hardiness and is ideal for conservation grazing.

**Judges' verdict**

'Fantastic texture'

**Mark Hedges**

'Delicately flavoured'

**Mark Price**

*Gatcombe Farm Shop, Gatcombe Farm, Flax Bourton, Bristol (01275 394404)*



**Red Poll**

ANOTHER ECONOMICALLY efficient breed that can graze on poor soils.

**Judges' verdict**

'Notionally I was committed to the Red Poll but, despite the hope, it's not my favourite'

**Carla Carlisle, who recently bought a herd of Red Poll**

*Oak House Farm Limited, Sproughton, Ipswich (www.oakhousefarm.com)*

## Cuts above the rest

What makes the ideal stew, steak and casserole? MARK HIX demystifies the cuts

### Leg

*Leg cuts include silverside, roasting and slow cooking, minute steaks*

### Silverside

*Best for salting and slow cooking*

### Topside

*Best for salting and slow cooking*

### Thick flank

*Ideal for slow cooking*

### Rump

*Use rump if you're grilling or roasting*

### Sirloin

*Great for grilling and roasting, or have it raw for carpaccio and steak tartare*

### Fillet

*Also a good choice for grilling, or have it raw for carpaccio and steak tartare*

### Flank

*Good for slow cooking, grilling and steak tartare*

### Fore rib

*Best for roasting and grilling*

### Thin rib

*Good for slow cooking*

### Chuck and Blade

*Use this for mincing and slow cooking*

### Thick rib

*Good for slow cooking*

### Brisket

*Good for salting and slow cooking*

### Neck and clod

*Slow cooking*

### Shin

*Also ideal for slow cooking*



# How to cook a steak

It's all in the sizzle, says Mark Hix

ONE are the days when we Britons had the nickname 'roast beef', but many families still do the traditional Sunday roast at home and perform a cremation ceremony at the same time. Our understanding of beef cuts and what to do with them is still not what it should be, compared to other European countries.

'People are afraid to get the pan hot enough. Don't try to cook a steak under a normal grill'

I find that one of the problems is what the customer actually does with their bit of beef once they leave the butcher's shop or supermarket. I could safely say that a large majority gets overcooked due to various factors. I've seen some steaks cut so thin that, by the time you turn it over, it's already cooked to medium.

Another problem is that we're afraid to get the pan hot enough. Don't try to cook a steak under a normal grill, as it'll just boil and not caramelize and colour in time on the outside to keep the juices in, unless you have an American cooker with a broiler or a built-in barbecue/chargrill.

My preferred choice of pan is a heavy-ribbed griddle pan—it's a must for any serious cook. The secret is to get it almost smoking (with your extractor on full blast, that is), then season your steak with sea salt and coarsely ground black pepper and lightly oil it.

Now, we're ready to go. The minute your steak hits the griddle, it will begin to colour



A 2cm thick steak only needs three minutes each side for rare

and seal in the juices, then all you need to do is keep an eye on it and flip it over. A 2cm thick steak will only need about three minutes on each side for rare, and the more steaks you cook, the more familiar you'll get with cooking degrees and when to take it off and stick it on the plate.

The best way to tell if your steak is done is to prod it with your finger—basically, the more giving and spongy it is, the rarer it is, and the firmer it becomes during cooking, the more it's getting cooked.

I'm very keen on buying big thick steaks for two like an old-fashioned porterhouse or T-bone or a rib steak on the bone. These can weigh about a kilo and look really great on the table, where you can just carve off slices as you need them.

Then, there are also the forgotten cuts that need a bit more attention and slow, careful cooking, such as oxtail, featherblade, cheeks and shin. These cuts really are under-used these days, apparently due to people not having enough time to cook—well, that's a lot of nonsense as far as I'm concerned, because a good old-fashioned braise can be cooked in a low oven while you're out or even overnight, or in a specially designed slow cooker. I think some people are just scared to cook. 🍴