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Cash Cows

CONNECTICUT STEAKHOUSES ARE NEVER OUT OF STYLE.

BY ELIZABETH KEYSER

The juicy grilled steak is an American icon, and the high-end steak house is a temple of casual luxury. In bad economic times, when businesses cut back on expense-account dining, they get hit hard. But Connecticut steak houses have weathered the storm. Fear not, steak lovers, the steak house is strong. In fact, it's evolving and getting even better.

"We felt the pinch," says Carmen Vacalebri, owner of Carmen Anthony Steakhouses in Waterbury and New Haven. The 2009 year was the restaurants' worst. "But sales are up for 2010," he says. Over the last two years, many customers cut back on the highest-priced entrées, skipped appetizers and declined dessert. But the "pummeling is over," according to the November 2010 industry report "Dinner Trends in the U.S." Sales at Morton's The Steakhouse plummeted in 2009 with a decline of 19.5 percent, but rose by 7.1 percent in the second quarter of 2010, according to the report. "People are spending more than they were a year ago," agrees Josh Itkan, general manager of Morton's in Hartford.

The steak house itself is changing. Once a bastion of male privilege, with plenty of dark wood, strong drinks and big steaks (and after-dinner cigars)—steak houses are lightening up and drawing new customers, men and women, with welcoming promotions and prix-fixe specials. Morton's introduced Bar Bites and Power Hour, which offer \$5 and \$6 specials on food at the bar (four mini filet mignon sandwiches, for example), wine and beer. Itkan says it's helped broaden the customer base.

"We have a very diverse age bracket, from 22-year-olds to people in their 80s," he says. "In the past it was 30-to-60-year-olds." Adds Frank Ferraro, the general manager of the Stamford Morton's, "It's opened up a different avenue for business entertainment, drawn younger professionals, and the female population in the bar is growing. It's dispelled the myth of 'the boys' club.'"

David Burke Prime Steakhouse also distinguishes itself by air-drying Creekstone Farms (Ky.) prime natural, hormone-free beef on-site. Chef Chris Shea believes that the panel of Himalayan rock salt in the humidity-controlled refrigerated locker draws out moisture from the air and imparts an almost imperceptible saltiness to the meat. Looking around at the shelves stocked with whole portions of air-drying beef labeled with their dates, Shea smiles, "I can tell you with pride, it doesn't get better than this." They offer 30-, 40- and 55-day aged steaks. The cooks use the trimmings and bones to make a sauce they call "The Love," which is brushed on the meat after grilling and served on the side. It's also the base of their "Parisienne-style" onion soup. Meat trimmings go into the dry-aged burger. Considering that dry-aging reduces the weight of the meat by about 25 percent, the cost of one of David Burke Prime's signature 40-day rib-eye steaks (ranging from 14 to 18 ounces) is a good value at \$49.

David Burke, who was once the corporate chef for Smith & Wollensky, opened Prime at Foxwoods around the same time. Amid its Vegas-worthy decor, Prime is making old new again with tableside service (preparing Caesar

salad, carving steak and putting the final flourishes on the “cake in the can”) and knowledgeable and personable staff.



Each Connecticut steak house has a different business model, yet whether a general manager describes himself as “just an employee,” or, as in Ferreira’s and Varna’s cases, as part owner, all these managers, partners, owners and chef-owners have something in common. They’re proud—proud of the quality of their products, the professionalism of their staff and all the ways they make their guests feel special. “We create an experience that makes you say ‘wow,’” says Varna. When Carmen Anthony says that no one cares more than a local owner, you believe him. But also talk to the staff at David Burke Prime.

Burke, who has three restaurants in New York City, one in Chicago and one in New Jersey, might not always be physically present at his Connecticut restaurant, but he is there in spirit. His name is invoked frequently by staff who have worked with him for years. A big laminated sign in the kitchen reads, “What would David want?”

To ride out the recession, many high-end steak houses have had to shave profit margins. Cutting quality was out of the question. “We have never done anything to compromise the quality of what we serve; even when the economy took a turn, we’ve never compromised quality or portions,” says Ferraro at Morton’s. And there’s a certain optimism these days in the voices at state steak houses—whether it’s chef Shea saying Prime’s doing 600 to 800 covers on Saturday nights, or Vacalebri declaring, “Once the recession is over, our brand will still be in place.”

Maybe they know that they’re on to something primal. “Steak has never gone out of style, and it never will,” says Ferreira.



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