



## *In a ranching,*

state like Oklahoma, the finest cuts make the biggest culinary impression. These three restaurants have taken a simple dish to extravagant heights.

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Photography by CHOATE HOUSE

# The Art of Steak



**"True refinement seeks SIMPLICITY."**

**S**TEAK IS A paradox—as comfortable dressed in foie gras butter and other finery as it is charred over coals on a backyard grill. Beef has long been a food of the people—whoever they are, wherever they are. Craving meat is deeply embedded in the human appetite; it's little wonder so many restaurants have dedicated themselves to the pursuit of its perfection.

What takes a steak from good to great is largely a matter of preference. The United States Department of Agriculture assigns several levels of quality to beef, with prime the highest. Prime steak—generally found on restaurant menus as cuts like filet mignon, rib eye, and strip—contains the

most fat marbling and accounts for about 2 percent of the nation's beef supply. Seasoning it with salt, pepper, and a dab of butter and searing it is the uncomplicated approach of most top-tier steak restaurants.

"I tend to think simple is best," says Justin Thompson, executive chef and owner of Prhyme: Downtown Steakhouse in Tulsa. "I've heard it said by a couple of my bosses in the past: 'True refinement seeks simplicity.'"

A veteran of Polo Grill and the Brasserie, Thompson operates a Tulsa restaurant lineup that includes Juniper, Tavolo, 624 Kitchen & Catering, and Prhyme, which is located in the burgeoning Brady Arts District. Prhyme takes a modern approach to the steak house method, referenced in the clean lines,

sleek furniture, and pops of color among black-stained wood that greet diners as they step into the dining room.

"The style of food preparation is more forward thinking than the typical steak house," says Thompson. "We don't do baked potatoes. Our side dishes and entrées are not by any means classic steak house."

Topped with a fried egg and melted Gruyere, asparagus takes on a new identity. Brussels sprouts come sautéed in butter and sprinkled with thick chunks of crispy bacon. Appetizers are equally inspired, with choices like buttery, fried escargots or rich veal marrow spread over warm bread.

"We would still be one of the best restaurants in Tulsa without our steaks," says operating partner and general manager T.C. LeRoy, who emphasizes that while steak is the main attraction, the restaurant invests as much care in its other dishes. The comforting truth is that there is no bad choice on the Prhyme menu.

By that logic, the decision to order any Prhyme steak would be a sound one. The most popular cut is the filet mignon. For a few dollars more, customers can indulge in tenderloin, prime strip, and rib eye, including dry-aged varieties. While aging—the breakdown of connective tissues—is the primary tenderization process for all steaks, most are wet-aged in their own juices. In dry-aging, large, high-grade sections are placed in a humidity- and temperature-controlled environment for up to six weeks to intensify flavor and soften texture, a process generally reserved for selective butchers and high-end restaurants like Prhyme.

Prhyme's dry-aged New York strip is marbled with fat so flavorful, it puts



Previous spread and above, foie gras butter tops the 30-day dry-aged New York strip steak at Prhyme: Downtown Steakhouse in Tulsa. Right, although the restaurant's beef is the star, non-steak eaters will find options on the menu including scallops, salads, duck breast, and bisques.







The Rancher's Club in Stillwater and other fine-dining restaurants serve USDA prime beef. The younger the beef and the more marbling it has, the higher the grade.

bacon to shame. The final result is transcendence to the upper echelons of carnivory.

While some may assume dry-aged cuts are best because they're most expensive, Thompson is more diplomatic. He contends that the best cut is whatever the customer prefers.

"All food experiences are subjective," says Thompson. "I think the trick with any good restaurant or chef is to find out what you're passionate about and introduce that to people without making them feel alienated. That's why I offer so many cuts and finishes, because what I think is great is not what everybody likes."

The grass-fed filet is Jennifer White's favorite. Along with that, her Prhyme choices typically include a cocktail to start, the caesar salad, seasonal vegetables, wine, and dessert.

"I go all out. If you're going to eat at a place like Chile, you need to invest in your meal because you get so much joy from eating their food," says White, who lives in Tulsa. "There's art put into their plate. I take so much more away from it than sustenance."

**THE BEEF EXPERIENCE** also headlines at the Ranchers Club in Stillwater, a restaurant inside the Atherton Hotel

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next to Oklahoma State University's Student Union. It is named in tribute to a group of OSU alumni—mostly in the ranching industry—who collectively donated more than \$1 million in capital to launch the restaurant in 2004.

A long hallway transitions visitors from campus bustle to white tablecloths and wine lists. In the cream-colored dining room, western-inspired oil paintings, cowhide accents, and an elaborately tooled Billy Cook saddle are artful reminders of what most guests have come for.

"We love our beef here; it's the main draw," says Naveen Kodadhala, director of food and beverage services at the restaurant and hotel. "When it comes to steaks, we're very selective. There's constant picking and sampling."

Filet mignon, porterhouse, and prime strip loin and rib eyes are among the cuts that bring in the dinner crowd. Three nights a week, the kitchen prepares a popular smoked, slow-cooked prime rib special. Another offering, available on the wedge salad and as a lunch filet, is the Vegas strip steak. OSU researchers developed the extraction method for this new cut from the chuck portion of the cow. Its flavor is comparable to a New York strip.

Whether a customer orders a Vegas strip or a rib eye, every steak comes to the table steaming, juices and butter pooling beneath, and cuts with little effort. Grill chef Greg Gibbs seasons each with salt and pepper and sears it on a Montague broiler, which cooks the meat simultaneously on both sides at 1,500 degrees to lock in moisture and flavor. A final brush of clarified, browned butter highlights the meat's natural depth.

"We keep it very simple, because it's a good product," Gibbs says. "We don't want to mask it; we just complement it."

Fresh steamed vegetables, whipped or baked potatoes, and mac and cheese serve as filling additions to the main course. Although the dinner service features a larger array of steaks, the restaurant is a popular lunch spot, particularly for those on campus.

Paul Epstein, an associate professor of classics at OSU, has a standing lunch reservation at the Ranchers Club three days a week.

"I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to have someplace to go to that's quiet, well managed, and nearby," Epstein says.

Customer happiness is, unsurprisingly, the overarching goal at the Ranchers Club.

"We want to provide gracious hospitality and have our guests leave satisfied every time," says Kodadhala. "We respect the products and want them to shine."

**EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE** also is a tenet of the philosophy at Ranch Steakhouse in Oklahoma City.

"The ultimate goal is 100 percent satisfaction," says general manager David Lamb. "It's attainable. We want people to walk out saying, 'That was the best steak I've ever had.'"

It's not unusual to hear similar sentiments in the main dining room, where guests lean forward in conversation at chocolate brown-cloaked tables and nestle into comfortable booths under the glow of dim lighting. Waiters glide



Nothing comes prepackaged at the Rancher's Club—all menu items are made from scratch. In the spring and summer, a patio garden supplies herbs, fruits, and vegetables.





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out from curtained doorways, carrying wine and plates of appetizers. The gentle clatter of silverware mingles with unobtrusive music making its way through the restaurant. The overall scene is elegant without being fussy.

Appetizers arrive first: a heap of golden onion rings and a platter of blueberries, strawberries, and dried apricots with wedges of artisanal cheese and toast points. Waiter Ryan Smith refills glasses with Zinfandel and, after the appetizers are depleted, returns with rolls warm from the oven. Next come the sides: enormous baked potatoes, family-style helpings of garlic mashed potatoes, sautéed asparagus, macaroni and cheese, and creamed spinach. The final flourish? The steak, served on a hot plate to keep it warm until the last bite. With a salty, delicate crust and a wet, red center, each bite releases a flood of juices and flavor best savored slowly.

“You go other places and order an appetizer, and they immediately want your entrée order,” says Lamb. “You get your appetizer and take maybe one or two bites, and here comes your entrée right on top of your appetizer. We will not bring your salad until you’ve finished your appetizer. We won’t bring your steak until you’ve finished your salad. We don’t rush things.”

With the average dinner taking two to three hours, the comfortable seating is a practical luxury. It might also have something to do with the restaurant’s ownership.

Like every steak served at Ranch Steakhouse in Oklahoma City, the strip is rested for several minutes prior to serving to allow its juices and flavor to distribute throughout the meat, a crucial step, according to general manager David Lamb.

Ranch Steakhouse began in 1999 as 501 Ranch, a joint venture between Bill and Larry Mathis—the Mathis Brothers—and Pete Holloway. Holloway departed a decade ago and went on to open Boulevard Steakhouse and Cafe 501 in Edmond and Oklahoma City. Ranch Steakhouse now is solely owned by the furniture moguls. When Larry Mathis is in town, he’s a regular, dining on the strip three nights a week.

Another regular is Bethany resident Mindy Stevenson. On her most recent trip to Ranch Steakhouse, she spent four hours catching up with friends over a *wagyu* filet mignon and wine.

“It is, hands down, my favorite place to get steak in the country,” she says. “I’m always going to feel good there. The service is exceptional, and the food is impeccable. It’s an experience, not just a meal.”

Therein lies the appeal of the epicurean steak. What the customer ultimately is investing in is not only the price of prime beef but the ritual that accompanies it. The dining experience is a ceremony of anticipation, of friends and first courses, that finally, sublimely, brings them to that first tender bite—and the next, and the next, and the next. 🍴

*Prhyme Downtown Steakhouse is located at 111 North Main Street in Tulsa. (918) 794-7700 or prhymetulsa.com. The Ranchers Club is next to the OSU Student Union on South Hester Street in Stillwater. (405) 744-2333 or theranchersclub.com. Ranch Steakhouse is at 3000 West Britton Road in Oklahoma City. (405) 755-3501 or ranchsteakhouse.com.*



The dining atmosphere at Ranch Steakhouse is both welcoming and elegant. Diners can expect their meals to span two hours or more, depending on party size.