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Strip District Meats Delivers a Taste of the Exotic

By Jennifer Brozak



Chris Olpp, chef and exotic-meats expert at Strip District Meats.

As you fire up the barbecue this summer, skip the standard ground-beef patties and instead wow your guests with a burger made from antelope, camel, or kangaroo.

These meat varieties may be difficult to find at your local grocery store, but they're standard fare at Strip District Meats (2123 Penn Ave.), where you'll discover everything from alligator and buffalo to venison and wild boar in the store's exotic meats section.

Strip District Meats has been providing Pittsburghers with fresh meat— butchered in house—since 1953. The company carries a full line of pork, beef, and chicken, and began adding exotic meats to their offerings about six years ago.

In-house Chef Chris Olpp, who's been with Strip District Meats for about a year, says that customers typically delve into tasting exotic meats in one of two ways.

“They either come in consciously wanting to do something different, or they have to be completely coaxed

into it,” he says.

Olpp, 29, has been working in the Pittsburgh food scene for about 10 years, most recently as a line cook at Sienna Mercato Mezzo. After studying photography, he says his natural “food curiosity” led him to pursue a career as a chef—or, as he prefers, a “practitioner of the art of cookery.” When not in the kitchen, he spends a great deal of time learning and reading so that he understands the processes of how different foods break down and respond to different temperatures.

“I’m there to explain to people what these foods are, how to prepare them, and to make recommendations,” says Olpp, who, in addition to his work with exotic meats, prepares the store’s marinated items, such as kabobs and wings, as well as ready-to-cook slow-cooker bags. “I’ve tried all of it, and I delve into the culture as well as the ecology of the meats as much as I can.”

He says he makes recommendations based on customers’ familiarity with standard meats, in addition to their willingness to expand their tastes. Popular sellers include bison, which can be prepared as a steak, roast, or burger, as well as elk and venison. Another popular item is Wagyu, an Australian- and American-style Kobe beef, which many consider to be the finest type of beef available anywhere in the world.

While these meats obviously cost more than standard cuts, Olpp says that “expensive is perspective.”

“Wagyu is prized for its fat. It’s tasty and delightful,” Olpp explains. “It’s pleasurable and buttery—if you prepare it correctly, you won’t believe that a cow can taste this good. It’s the *crème de la crème* of beef.”

The cows used for Wagyu beef are typically more sustainably raised, which are better for the ecosystem, says Olpp. He also points out that Wagyu has less saturated fats and contains higher levels of Omega 3 and 6 and more monounsaturated fatty acids than conventionally raised beef.

Strip District Meats carries a variety of sausages made with exotic meats, such as wild-boar bratwursts or rabbit, python, and jalapeño sausages, which are mixed with pork.

“Meats like python are very lean, so we typically add some pork fat to them to make sure they don’t dry out when they’re cooked,” Olpp says. He explains that python, which is typically sold diced and frozen, can be a bit tough and chewy, so preparation is key: “The best way to make python is to curry it with roasted vegetables and to serve it over rice.”

Ground meats, such as ground python, camel, kangaroo, or ostrich can also be a good way to “dip your toe” into trying exotic meats. “They’re a little less expensive, and you can shape them into a burger by using breadcrumbs or egg yolk or even avocado,” says Olpp.

Wild boar is another popular item at Strip District Meats. The store sells wild boar in chops, ribs, shoulders, tenderloins, and bacon, as well as in prepared spring rolls, dumplings, and stew. “Wild boar is the only meat we carry that’s a wild pest animal,” he says. “They’re fast and mean, but they taste delicious.”

Bison, or buffalo, also sells quickly. Part of the bovine subfamily, it’s similar to beef in taste, but has a richer, deeper flavor and a lighter texture, says Olpp, who grew up in the Poconos a stone’s throw from a bison farm. The store sells a wide variety of buffalo steaks, including ribeye, T-bone, and porterhouse steaks; ground buffalo, “beefalo” burgers, and hot dogs; as well as eight-ounce bison burgers. Additional items can be special-ordered if not found in the store.

One of the biggest misconceptions people have about exotic meats is that they will be gamey or taste like another type of meat or poultry, but this is often the result of improper cooking.

“It you make it right, python will taste like python, gator will taste like gator, and frog legs will taste like frog legs,” he says. “Preparation is everything.”

For those new to exotic meats, Olpp has prepared a recipe for bison steaks that’s flexible enough for customers to adapt to make it their own. He says that this recipe will “get your grilling season going in the right direction.” Olpp says that this dish pairs well with parmesan brussel sprouts (grilled brussel sprouts tossed in garlic, lemon juice, and parmesan) and horseradish mashed potatoes. For more recipes, visit stripdistrictmeats.com/recipes.

Marinated Bison Steaks

4 lbs bison steaks (buffalo filet, New York strip, or porterhouse)

Bison Coffee Marinade

2 cups strong black coffee

½ cup coffee liqueur (Kahlua)

4 Tbsp dark brown sugar

1 Tbsp toasted mustard seed
(or 1 tsp ground mustard)

5 Tbsp Worcestershire sauce

2 Tbsp balsamic vinegar

3 cloves garlic (minced)

3 Tbsp toasted peppercorns

Salt (to taste)

Combine all ingredients in a bag. Marinate for 4 hours or overnight. Half an hour before eating, pull the steak from the marinade and allow to temper (come to room temperature). Heat your grill until it’s very hot. Cook for 3 minutes on each side of the steak (until you see a sear you like). Then take off of direct heat and allow to cook on the top rack (away from flames) until a meat thermometer registers a sustained 130 degrees. Allow meat to rest for 10 minutes, then enjoy with some nice summer sides.



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Jennifer Brozak is a freelance writer from North Huntingdon who has a passion for all things Pittsburgh. She contributes to a variety of local and national outlets, and blogs about her family’s escapades at onecommittedmama.com.

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