

# taste

NORTH SHORE GUIDE TO EXCEPTIONAL CUISINE

## Tales from the butcher block



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**MY supplier ties the brown-paper package with a string, gives me a steady gaze and comprehensive instructions and sends me on my way, precious cargo in hand.**

It's not cash or diamonds that I'm carrying, but for a dedicated food-lover, it's almost as valuable: Canada Prime rib steaks, dry aged for more than 30 days.

"If those aren't the best steaks you've ever had, we have a problem," grins Sebastian Cortez, the West Vancouver butcher who has hooked me up with a meaty equivalent to gold. It may sound like brash talk from the 32-year-old Chilean-born butcher, but he's entitled. It's been more than a year since Cortez opened his Dundarave shop, Sebastian & Co. Fine Organic Meats, and he and wife Jessica Gibson Cortez are garnering rave reviews from the neighbourhood and far beyond it.

Cortez was a chef before



NEWS photo Cindy Goodman

**SEBASTIAN Cortez and Jessica Gibson Cortez sell natural, organic meats and some of their favourite accompaniments from their Dundarave shop.**

he was a butcher, trained at George Brown College and employed in the kitchen at Jamie Kennedy's restaurant at the Royal Ontario Museum.

"Being a chef can be pretty lonely," says Cortez, standing in his sunny little shop. "You're off on Wednesday during the day . . . who's off on Wednesdays? There's no one to hang out with. And when you're working — the hours — you get off at two o'clock in the morning."

He decided to try his hand at butchering and began working at Beretta Organic Farms in Ontario, then took the head butcher job at The Healthy Butcher in Toronto.

"It's not as competitive . . . there's pressure, but it's a

different kind of pressure." The hours are more tolerable, although when you're as passionate about your work as Cortez is, you're never really "off."

It was during a visit to Vancouver with his then-girlfriend Gibson (who was raised here), that he noticed a dearth of independent butcher shops: "the kind of butcher shops where they really care about what they do, like in Toronto. I thought it was a good opportunity for me."

And it was a stroke of luck for Dundarave that he found the perfect shop space here.

Gibson Cortez handles the buying for the specialty products: vinegars, spreads, crackers and cookies, Italian

pastas and cheese. Some is local, but much is imported. "We've travelled a lot," says Cortez.

"These are all products that we really, really like."

He handles the butchery. The beef, lamb, chicken, turkey and pork products sold at Sebastian & Co. are all made in house with natural ingredients, using no nitrates or preservatives. Cortez and Cale Price (whose day job is chef at the Century Plaza Hotel) make sausages flavoured with spices, with peppers, wine, and fruit. Burger patties contain no eggs and no breadcrumbs (although one variety does have a mix of sundried tomato and caramelized onion).

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taste

# Dry aging increases tenderness and flavour

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There's duck confit and Cortez's own foie gras parfait, beautifully Frenched racks of lamb and venison, and organic chicken that's been spatchcocked and sealed in a bag with marinade, all ready for the barbecue.

His customers have taken notice of what he's doing. "Oh man! Your bacon is amazing," enthuses one customer (who, Cortez slyly notes, works for a local natural foods grocer, but prefers to buy meat from him). "It has kind of a barnyard characteristic. Holy! It's so good." It's the hickory used to smoke it, Cortez tells him. His own love for food is obvious, and he

never comes off as condescending when explaining things to his customers . . . rather, his enthusiasm is contagious. And it's when he talks about the beef he sells that the faith he has in his products is most evident. He buys the whole animal from the Blue Goose Cattle Company and uses all of it. He turns muscles and less tender cuts into ground beef and burgers, cuts flavourful flank steaks, makes beef jerky, smoked pastrami, roast beef and bresola (thin slices of beef cured in red wine and salt, along with a mix of citrus fruits and spices). The middle cuts are stored in the walk-in cooler for dry aging. It's not something many butchers have the space for any more, and it's expensive — for each day that it's stored, a cut of beef can lose up to one per cent of its weight in moisture. And while that means the flavours grow increasingly concentrated (which is a good thing) the butcher's profit drops at the same time. But aging is worthwhile — it increases tenderness by allowing naturally occurring enzymes within the meat to slowly break down some of the connective tissues that contribute to toughness.

Most supermarket butcher shops don't age their beef at all, while others use wet-aging: the beef is partially butchered then

vacuum sealed into plastic bags for storage. "But they're sitting in their own blood, and they can taste kind of funky," says Cortez. His own cuts of beef can be seen from the shop floor, through a horizontal window into the cooler. They are dark, mottled and purplish black in colour, rather than the bright red I'm used to seeing. We step into the chill to take a closer look.

"They are rotting, in a way," says Cortez, and he takes one down off the shelf to show me. The surface is puckered and hard-looking, but when he shows me the inside, it's perfect: cherry red flesh threaded with creamy streaks of fat. Cortez uses only Canada prime and AAA beef, which means it has significant marbling, upping the tenderness, juiciness and flavour. Cortez aims to age his beef for 40 days, "but we're really busy: I go through a lot quickly." He's averaging about 30 to 38 days . . . but no one is complaining.

After trimming off some of the fat and surface of my steaks he wraps them and gives me clear instructions: sear them on high heat on the barbecue, then move them to indirect heat to cook them until done. We follow them to the letter, and we are rewarded. With just a little olive oil, sea salt and pepper, the meat is exquisite, with rich flavour and buttery texture. There's little doubt: it is indeed one of the best steaks I've ever had.

Sebastian & Co. Fine Organic meats is located at 2425 Marine Dr., West Vancouver. Visit [www.sebastianandco.ca](http://www.sebastianandco.ca) for information.



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