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A cut above

Deckle, a long-overlooked section of beef, finds new favor among chefs

BY BRET THORN

Jay Caputo just wanted to serve his guests a nicer looking rib-eye steak, and he ended up with what, for him, was a whole new cut of meat.

"If you just cut a steak off of a rib, there's a lot of gristle and fat involved," says Caputo, the chef and owner of Espuma in Rehoboth Beach, Del.

That's because rib-eye steak actually comes in two parts: the loin and the cap, or deckle. The latter part, which is part of the deep pectoral muscle, is separated from the loin by an unattractive, coarse strip of fat and connective tissue.

But steak aficionados love that part, Caputo says.

"People who really know meat either save the cap, because they want to save the best for last, or they eat it first because they can't wait for it. It's that good," he says.

But a lot of diners don't even bother with it, and it goes to waste. The same is true with prime rib, in which the deckle is that often overcooked — and overlooked — part on one end of each slice. So about a year and a half ago, Caputo cut the deckle off of the rib eye and tried to figure out what to do with it.

He found that this highly marbled piece of meat had the tenderness of a filet, but with much more flavor.

"I think it's the best dry-heat-cookery piece of meat on the cow," Caputo says.

He began to offer deckle preparations as specials, but they wouldn't sell.

"I couldn't give the deckle away," he laments.

So for awhile he used it for the staff meal. "It makes a really good cheese steak," he says. But gradually he educated his staff about the cut, and they in turn educated the guests.

"Now I can't keep it in stock," Caputo says.

The deckle actually is best known as the fatty part of the brisket, the favored cut for pastrami and the aficionado's preferred part of "smoked meat," the Jewish-Canadian cousin of corned beef.

In fact, the deckle is any part of the strip of muscle and fat that lies right on top of the ribs, according to James Reagan, a specialist from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

When it is taken whole off of the primal rib cut, chefs say it resembles flank steak. But it's more tender and more marbled.

"It's the flavor of rib eye with the tenderness of filet," says Eric Ziebold, executive chef of



Deckle is served as a carpaccio-style dish at Espuma in Rehoboth Beach, Del. Chef Jay Caputo quickly sears the meat and serves it at room temperature, creating a texture that he says "almost melts in your mouth."

CityZen in Washington, D.C. It's the only cut of beef that he uses without braising. "Once you've had it, it's hard to go back to anything else," he says.

Ziebold is an alumnus of The French Laundry, and calls the deckle of the rib eye by its French name, calotte, which means "cap." To him, the word "deckle" is a common butchers' term that applies only to the cut of meat on the brisket.

He serves calotte with creamed leeks, Périgord truffle macaroons and sauce Périgieux. He uses USDA Prime calotte, and it costs him about \$25 per pound.

At The French Laundry, chef de cuisine Corey Lee uses a Kobe-style beef from Idaho. "It's an expensive part of the expensive rib eye from an expensive cow," he says of his calotte. "By the time we have usable portions, you're looking at around \$50 a pound after it's trimmed," he says. He uses the lean trim in sausages and other preparations, and he uses the melted fat to enrich items such as potatoes.

Sometimes the staff at The French Laundry cures calotte in salt over several weeks and then uses it like Italians use cured pork fat, or lardo, shaving it thinly over salads and other items. "All the fat stays intact [during the curing], so it's a great mouth feel, and the flavor intensifies," Lee says.

But mostly they grill it. "It's really tender," he says. "I think it has to do with the way the grains run. They're a little looser, so there's great eating quality to it."

Recently, Lee served the calotte with broccolini, Yukon gold potato and crispy-fried

bone marrow. The marrow, a 2-inch center-cut, was popped out of the bone, floured and sautéed until crispy. The potatoes were slowly cooked in goose fat and then crisped to order with shallots and fines herbes. The broccolini was lightly blanched and then roasted to caramelize it.

Ziebold of CityZen says that the unusual quality of the grain also makes the calotte cook differently. Although on a prime rib that calotte is the part that is cooked more, Ziebold says that's simply because it's on the outside of that cut of meat. He says it takes longer to cook than you would expect, and so people tend to undercook it.

"As you're cooking it, you really have to believe that if it feels like it's rare, it's rare," he says.

Back at Espuma, chef Caputo is serving deckle at room temperature as a sort of quickly seared carpaccio. Sliced and served not too cold, the deckle "almost melts in your mouth, literally," he says. If it is too cold it tends to feel more like congealed fat.

When he makes it as steak, he sears it and then cooks it at 300 degrees for 15 to 20 minutes, to medium rare, and then lets it sit for 4 to 5 minutes. His goal is to cook it evenly rather than getting an outer char and red middle. If he were to grill it, he says he would start on a hot spot and then move it to a colder one.

Deckle is too expensive for Caputo to serve as a steak by itself, since for every 12 rib-eye steaks he gets six servings' worth of deckle. So he'll serve 5 to 6 ounces of deckle with three and a half ounces of veal cheek, for example.

For Jeffrey Steelman, chef de cuisine at Tuscany at the Mohegan Sun casino in Uncasville, Conn., cost is not an issue. The casino's butcher treats the deckle as trim from prime ribs. And the Mohegan goes through large amounts of prime rib for their buffets. Steelman calls the deckle Tuscan Cap and wood grills it before serving with spaghetti squash and artichoke-truffle purée. "You can eat it with a spoon," he says.

In Boston at the Metropolitan Club, chef Jeffrey Fournier actually was pushed by his publicists, who learned of Caputo's deckle, to use it himself.

He actually at first went to the more traditional brisket deckle, but soon found that the deckle of the sirloin and rib eye was more fun to work with. "It's super tender, and it also has that kind of nutty, dry-aged flavor."

He serves it as an appetizer, braising it in veal stock and plating 5 ounces of it with bone marrow still in the bone and a crostini made to order with extra-virgin olive oil, caper and gold leaf.