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Where's the Beef? A Steak Makes a Long Journey

By JESSICA FIRGER

The hanging beef arrives long before sunrise, when a 44-foot-long trailer pulls up to Unit B-14 at the Hunts Point Meat Market in the South Bronx. Inside are the carcasses of 100 steers, now divided into twice as many sides at a total weight of about 42,000 pounds—more than $100,000 worth of red meat.

Natalie Keyssar for the Wall Street Journal
Cut portions at Master Purveyors

The meat has just completed an overnight haul from Chicago, but its journey through one of the world's largest wholesale food markets to the plates of New York City's finest steakhouses has just begun.

"This came to us today and it was walking on Friday," says Sam Solasz, 83 years old, who opened wholesaler Master Purveyors more than 50 years ago. He moved his operation to Hunts Point from the original Meatpacking District in Manhattan in 2001, as the once-gritty neighborhood was undergoing a transformation into a night-life and shopping destination.

Master Purveyors specializes in prime fresh and dry-aged Angus beef, served at renowned restaurants like Keens Steakhouse, Peter Luger, Wolfgang's Steakhouse, Gotham Bar and Grill and the Four Seasons, as well as at markets like Fairway. Only 2% of U.S. cattle are graded "prime," a label that normally commands twice the price of "choice" or "select" meats.

At Hunts Point, five men unload the truck and send the sides of beef to two holding rooms—one for hindquarters and one for forequarters—via a long zip line on four rails. The short loin (porterhouse, New York shell and T-bone steaks), tenderloin (filet mignon), top butt and flank are among the cuts of the hindquarter, while the brisket, chuck, plate and rib make up the forequarter. Emptying the truckload takes five hours.

Prime beef must always hang. Laying carcasses flat on

Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal

Wolfgang Zwiener, above, inspects meats to purchase for his steakhouse inside Master Purveyors.

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In a 34- degree aging room meats age for a little bit less than a month, depending on the preferences of the buyer.

a truck or in a storage room crushes the muscle, which is why processing meat the old-fashioned way is such a costly, time-consuming endeavor.

"We're the last of the Mohicans," says Mark Solasz, 48, assistant vice president at Master Purveyors and Sam Solasz's youngest son. "It's a dying industry because it's hard work."

When Sam Solasz arrived in New York City 1951, the 23-year-old Holocaust survivor had just $10 in his pocket, he says. Mr. Solasz says he found work at a hot-dog factory. With $6,500 saved from his job, he founded the company in 1957.

The young entrepreneur, who learned butchering from his father in Bialystok, Poland, kept late hours on Washington Street. He started off processing ground beef, then graduated to hanging beef.

As Master Purveyors grew, he introduced his sons to the business. Mark and his older brother Scott learned how to swing a forequarter early in the morning before school.

In the two years before moving to Hunts Point, Master Purveyors' rent increased from $6 a square foot to $100. Today, Hunts Point's 60-acre wholesale campus is home to seven buildings containing most of the butchering and processing companies that once had Manhattan addresses. Master Purveyors has four times the space it had downtown. "Like moving from Woolworth's to Bloomingdale's," says Mark Solasz.

It's a chilly 34 degrees inside the processing room and the sweet, musty air smells of mold and malted milk balls.

Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal

Restaurant buyers stamp the cuts they have selected.

"We don't call it a smell, it's an aroma," says Mark Solasz, a graduate of New York University Law School, who handles clients and supervises the twice-weekly delivery of meat. His older brother, Scott, oversees meat processing and the dry-aging room. Their father, who planned to retire 17 years ago, works on selection and makes every pound of chopped meat.

"All of my hands are crippled from cutting meat," the elder Mr. Solasz says. "I have to please my customers rain or shine."

In the 16,000-square-foot dry-aging room, 6,000 slabs of meat sit in the dark and damp for three to four weeks, developing a mature flavor. The cuts of meat there shrink in volume by 15% and the meat's outside turns the color of charcoal, though it remains red and marbled underneath.

Amy Rubenstein, co-owner of Peter Luger, comes in Thursday mornings to choose her restaurant's weekly stash, rummaging through rows of short loins and stamping her selections with the Luger insignia.

"They show us everything and I go and pick," says Ms. Rubenstein, daughter of Sol Forman, who bought the steakhouse in the 1950s. "It's beautiful, and we've always done it this way." Peter Luger has bought meat from Master Purveyors for more than 50 years, and the restaurant has yet to miss a week.

Wolfgang Zwiener, 70, is a former Peter Luger host and owner of the Wolfgang's Steakhouse chain. He says he can spot a good steak a mile away.

"We're looking for the marbling, the red coloring," says Mr. Zwiener, who also ships meat from Master Purveyors to his restaurants in Waikiki and Beverly Hills.

A normal day inside the processing room runs like a slasher film: There's not much of a plotline, and yet it's hard to look away while a dozen industrious butchers in white, blood-smeared coats and yellow hard hats clean and cut meat. They process 100,000 pounds of meat each week. The concrete floor is stained red and littered with slippery, congealed fat, some of which is sold to a biodiesel company in Texas.

A few men clean forequarters, placing kidneys in a neat pile. Another group feeds beef chuck into an enormous grinder that churns out about 15,000 pounds of hamburger meat each week. The hardest job of all is lifting a 100-plus-pound forequarter or hindquarter to the electric band saw, according to butcher George Fernandez.

In the old days, Mr. Solasz and his sons explain, butchers relied on handsaws and a daisy chain of meat hooks to break down sides into its familiar cuts such as briskets, chucks and sirloins. With the aid of machinery, they can now get through twice as much meat.

For most commercial meat, the next stop is a restaurant or a supermarket. But prime beef, Master Purveyors' specialty, won't meet a side of creamed spinach for at least another three weeks.