

All about DRY-AGING BEEF

MARK MILLS, CHEF CUM OWNER OF THE PLOUGH IN AUSTRALIA SHARES HIS KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE ON THE ART OF DRY-AGING BEEF

Dry-aged beef is the rage on the food scene currently. Much sought-after by discerning beef and steak lovers who are willing to pay top dollar for it, more chefs and restaurateurs are taking notice of this meaty speciality. For the uninitiated, chef cum owner of the Plough Mark Mills dishes up some interesting facts about dry-aging and what makes dry-aged beef a cut above the rest.

According to Chef Mills, the dry-aging process changes the beef through evaporation of moisture from the muscle while creating greater concentration of the beefy flavour and taste. The beef's natural enzymes also break down connective tissues in the muscle, resulting in more tender beef.

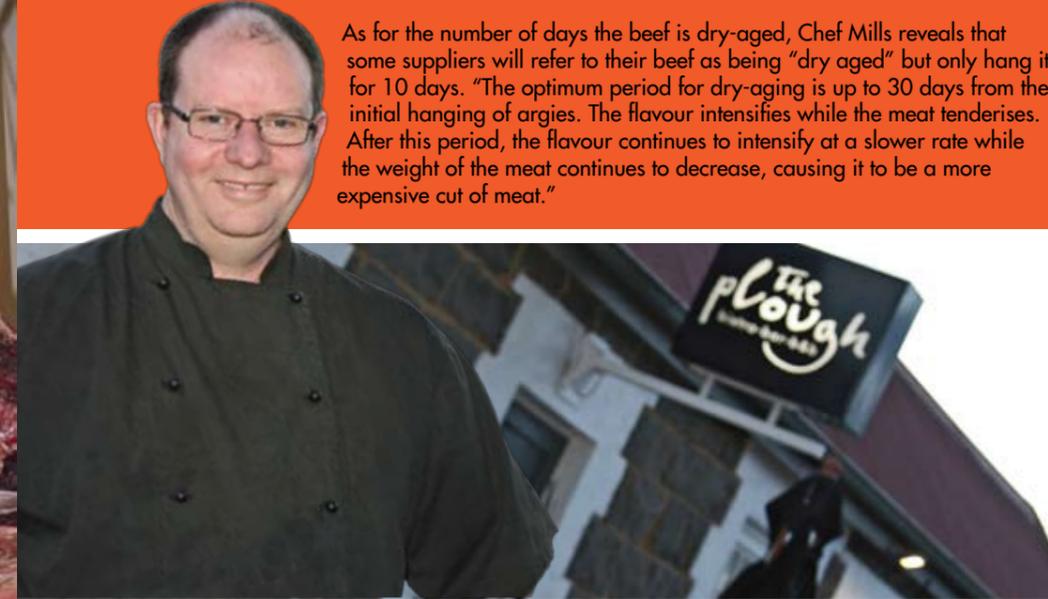
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WET-AGING AND DRY-AGING

Chef Mills explains that wet-aged beef is beef that has typically been aged from five days in a vacuum-sealed bag to retain its moisture. "Wet-aging is popular because it takes less time; typically it only requires a few days. Moisture accumulates in the vacuum bag and the amount of moisture accumulated depends on the length of time the beef is aged. This results in less weight loss, yielding higher profits for wholesalers and butchers."



He says "For dry-aging, most of the process occurs in the first 30 days. After that, there is not a lot of gain compared with the loss of weight resulting from the drying process. A luxury we have at The Plough is the capacity to have a larger cooler room that's specifically designed for beef that allows me to have beef dry-aged for approximately 49 days."

As for the number of days the beef is dry-aged, Chef Mills reveals that some suppliers will refer to their beef as being "dry aged" but only hang it for 10 days. "The optimum period for dry-aging is up to 30 days from the initial hanging of argies. The flavour intensifies while the meat tenderises. After this period, the flavour continues to intensify at a slower rate while the weight of the meat continues to decrease, causing it to be a more expensive cut of meat."



According to him, the optimum time to enjoy dry-aged beef is after 30 days. "It also depends on how intensive the Chef wants the flavour to be. He has to ensure that the weight of the meat does not diminish further than required. The longer the beef is hung results in higher amounts of moisture being lost, producing greater flavour with the adverse effects of shrinking weight and greater costs of the meat. The beef requires more intense trimming due to the effects of the drying process, i.e. trimming of the black meat."

After ageing, the meat is portioned then vacuum packed. Dry-aged beef will have the same shelf life as non-aged beef.



KEY FACTS ON DRY-AGING BEEF

The dry-aging process is usually carried out in a drying room that consists of a purpose-built cool room that operates between 1-1.5° Celsius with a large hanging rail, to hang each argie from securely.

Argie is the beef on the bone that has the four primal cuts: Scotch/Rib eye, Porterhouse, Eye Fillet and Rump which represent 23% of the entire carcass. It is important that this cool room maintains its constant temperature and it cannot be used as a preparation/storage fridge for daily use. If the cool room gains too much moisture, the beef will become slimy and mouldy.

Dry-aging is ideally suitable for grass-fed beef that is over 24 months of age. This ensures a fat coverage on the body that cannot be attained from being grain-fed. If the beef is too young, the fat coverage is not thick enough to withst and the rigours of the dry-aging process. That is why other meats do not meet the criteria for successful dry-aging.

Chef Mills tells us that dry-aging is usually done with primals, on the bone. "In my case, we use argies. However, scotch and porterhouse on the bone can be aged, usually taking the eye fillet off. There is no financial benefit in dry-aging a secondary cut of beef that will be slow cooked."

Due to the costs involved for dry-aging, only exclusive restaurants can offer this product on their menu. Increasingly, more chefs are keen to offer this speciality in their restaurants and discerning patrons are eager to savour the flavour that dry-aging produces.

Chef Mark Mills learned to the art of dry-aging beef by spending time with the owner of his local abattoir. "The abattoir owner shared his knowledge of dry-aging beef with me. He was integral in helping with the design of my dry-aging room, as well as being the supplier of my black angus beef.

The enterprising chef cum owner says he was inspired to go into dry-aging beef after he experienced the flavours of dry-aged beef.

"I decided to invest in my own dry-aging room to ensure that I could offer this quality product throughout my restaurants," says Chef Mills. "Also, the cost-effective management of my business offered me the opportunity to buy the entire argie, for me to break it down according to the requirements of the kitchen e.g. for stock, sauce, curry, pie and primal steak cuts. The association with basic produce fulfills my aspirations as a chef knowing the paddock-to-plate origins." When it comes to cooking dry-aged beef, Chef Mills points out that due to the process of dry-aging, moisture evaporates from the muscle to create greater beef flavour and taste. "This results in more tender beef. Therefore, the most appropriate method of cooking dry-aged beef is char-grilling. At The Plough, I char-grilled dry-aged porterhouse served with chips, salad and béarnaise sauce."

He points out that it is difficult to describe the eating quality of the dry-aged beef compared to normal grass and grain-fed beef. "You have to enjoy and taste it yourself to understand its appeal. The enzymes breaking down the connective tissue within the muscles during the dry-aging that results in the beef's more tender and intense flavour."