

FEATURE

MODERN

MEAT MARKETS

There has been a proliferation of European-style butcheries around Singapore in the past few years. We find out from the passionate folks behind Huber's Butchery, where their business stands in our local food scene.

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PREMIUM CUTS

One of the many conveniences offered by Huber's Butchery is pre-marinated meats that are just pining for a quick sear on a sizzling grill.



A CUT ABOVE

Ernst Huber is all smiles as he eagerly shares his vast knowledge of meats, butchery and all things gastronomic

After spending years honing his culinary skills with stints as executive chef for various hotels around Asia, Swiss-native Ernst Huber retired his chef's knife in Singapore in exchange for a sturdy cimeter – otherwise known as a butcher's knife – to realise his dream of owning a European-style butchery and delicatessen. Now overseeing Huber's Butchery with his two sons, Ryan and Andre, Ernst thrives in bringing a little slice of Europe and her lush gastronomic culture to Singaporean consumers.



IN THE BEGINNING

When the butchery first opened in 2008, the Hubers saw an expat-heavy customer base as locals struggled to understand the concept of a bespoke butchery. Ernst explains, "It is a totally different experience for many Singaporeans who are used to going to the supermarkets and picking out pre-packaged cuts of meat with clearly marked labels. Here, you have to tell us what you want."

Indeed, the rules have changed. Instead of rummaging through cling-wrapped portions of meat and eyeballing the amount needed for a meal, you have to translate your order into pounds or grams. Instead of the generic sirloin or flank steak, you have a much wider variety of cattle and much more specific cuts to choose from.

Thankfully, Huber's Butchery has a friendly team of trained butchers at hand to help with any meat-related queries. "For a while, we would see local shoppers coming into the store to look around," Ernst quipped, "They'd peek curiously at the items we have on display and leave empty handed while nodding politely at our staff. It's like they were trying to get a feel of the place." Baby steps.

But by word of mouth, the butchery began building a strong reputation for excellent service, quality products and flexible customisations, and their clientele has been growing since. The locals have certainly warmed up to the concept of a modern, European-style butchery, although Ernst jokes that they still get customers getting caught off guard and surprised when the staff greet them.

Beyond knife skills

On the other side of the counter, stepping into the role of a modern day butcher is a different experience to many as well. "A good number of our staff are trained cooks who had only worked in kitchens. One of the main challenges they face is the transition to a front-of-house position which requires a lot of socialising," says Ernst.

The learning curve is steep. Not only do the new recruits have to learn how to interact with customers, they have to know their meats well enough to be able to dish out advice on anything ranging from the flavour profile of different cuts to recipe ideas and even recommend alcohol pairings. Of course, they must be proficient in cleaning, trimming and cutting the meats, which would require an almost intimate knowledge of the product.





Ernst admits that, "An even bigger challenge is to not only be familiar with a variety of products, but to become experts in these meats and dishes that, frankly, are not something they might have ever eaten before – it just isn't part of their diet."

Changing tastebuds

Veal escalopes and boeuf bourguignon may not be traditional dishes in this part of the world, but they certainly are no strangers to the menus here. As Ryan Huber, the elder son of Ernst and Managing Director at Huber's Butchery, elaborates, "Singaporeans today travel a lot and this keeps them acutely attuned to the latest global food trends. At the same time, they are more and more educated about food cultures and histories because of programmes on the television food channels."

A noticeable contrast from the shy and hesitant patrons that the butchery saw in its earlier years, the customers today are more confident and more knowledgeable. Not only are many already familiar with the difference between grain-fed and grass-fed beef, they are also eager to experiment with new ingredients and recipes. Ryan continues, "We've had customers coming in to ask about pancetta after they ate it during their travels and wanted to recreate the dish from scratch." The exposure to the cuisine of Europe and beyond has also groomed a more international palate and accompanying pantry, especially amongst the younger budding home cooks.



THE SINGAPOREAN ADVANTAGE

In Europe, Australia and the US, there is a deep affinity to what Ernst calls "happy meat", whereby the meat's provenance marks its quality and taste: happy cattle equate flavourful beef. Thus, there is an added assurance when you know your local farmers or cattle ranchers, and are able to learn the backstory of your meats. For this unspoken rule – and a larger underlying economic reason – local butchers in these regions mainly sell locally raised meats, leaving little room and demand for imports.

While Singapore is blessed with a vibrant food scene, we cannot ignore the missing agricultural sector that pushes the gastronomy of a nation. Although we have bourgeoned as a country of polished globetrotters with a distinct penchant for the epicurean, there remains a disconnection between the food on the plates and the source of such ingredients. However, that does not necessarily mean we are at a disadvantage.

"The Europeans may be perfectly content with their locally bred "happy meats", and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that," Ernst affirms, "But in Singapore, because we don't have livestock nor the responsibility for it, we are given the unique opportunity to offer a much wider variety of meats from different sources." At Huber's Butchery, there are seven types of beef available, which may be the most extensive range available at any local butchery around the world.

Modern challenges

"Believe it or not," Ernst claims, "the meat industry is constantly trying to find 'new' cuts of meat." It isn't that far a reach, considering how food trends not only present new dishes but also reintroduce us to some previously unpopular or unfamiliar ingredients.

As Ernst recounts, "I remember when ox tongue was such an unwanted cut that the farmers would be so happy when anyone would buy it from them. Then, the Japanese and Koreans discovered that it was delicious on the BBQ, and prices sky-rocketed almost overnight." Economists would tell you that such are the perils of supply and demand.

On the (re)discovery of new cuts, the market often becomes so shaken that Ernst has found himself cut from the supply because the farmers simply had no stock to offer. He explains, "The Japanese importers were so serious about getting their meats that they would sign contracts with farms in Australia to have their entire reserve shipped directly to their company in Japan, and they would even send representatives to oversee the process to ensure the farmers did not withhold any surplus."

Aside from the cutthroat competition that the industry occasionally invokes, Ernst and his sons are a relaxed bunch, cracking jokes and teasing each other over lunch. Underneath this jovial portrait lies a stern commitment to the art of butchery and personalised service. Ernst likens this to running a luxe fashion boutique, "There is a lot of work that goes into a beautiful presentation, and even more work goes into ensuring that every customer enjoys a tailor-made service." Like fashion, the meat industry is only getting bolder and bigger to whet the growing appetite for the next gourmet novelty. ●



PRIME PICKS

1. A workday at the butchery starts with the meticulous trimming and portioning of various meats for the display.

2. Luxuriating in robust marinade and spice rubs, the array of prepared meats lined neatly along the countertops are as much a feast of flavours as they are a spectacle of colours.

3. The father and son trio maintains a close relationship as they share tasting notes and business talks over a sampling of dry-cured hams from the deli section.

4. Trays of seasoned beef patty await a visit to a hot griddle before huddling between toasted buns. **5.** Have your steak purchase weighed and wrapped in paper – like any good European butchery would.



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