

All You Can Hold for Five Bucks

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[Brooklyn Beefsteak](#) Mar 13, 2015



Beefsteak dinner at Reisenweber's to honor H.H. Rogers & Mark Twain, originally published by Bain News Service.

The New York State steak dinner, or “beefsteak,” is a form of gluttony as stylized and regional as the riverbank fish fry, the hot-rock clambake, or the Texas barbeque. Some old chefs believe it had its origin sixty or seventy years ago, when butchers from the slaughterhouses on the East River would sneak choice loin cuts into the kitchens of nearby saloons, grill them over charcoal, and feast on them during their Saturday-night sprees. In any case, the institution was essentially masculine until 1920, when it was debased by the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the Constitution of the United States. The Eighteenth Amendment brought

about mixed drinking; a year and a half after it went into effect, the salutation “We Greet Our Better Halves” began to appear on the souvenir menus of beefsteaks thrown by bowling, fishing, and chowder clubs and lodges and labor unions. The big, exuberant beefsteaks thrown by Tammany and Republican district clubs always had been strictly stag, but not long after the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the suffrage, politicians decided it would be nice to invite females over voting age to clubhouse beefsteaks. “Womenfolks didn’t know what a beefsteak was until they got the right to vote.” An old chef once said.

It didn’t take women long to corrupt the beefsteak. They forced the addition of such things as Manhattan cocktails, fruit cups, and fancy salads to the traditional menu of slices of ripened steaks, double lamb chops, kidneys, and beer by the pitcher. They insisted on dance orchestras instead of brassy German bands. The life of the party at a beefsteak used to be the man who let out the most ecstatic grunts, drank the most beer, ate the most steak, and got the most grease on his ears, but women do not esteem a glutton, and at a contemporary beefsteak it is unusual for a man to do away with more than six pounds of meat and thirty glasses of beer. Until around 1920, beefsteak etiquette was rigid. Knives, forks, napkins, and tablecloths never had been permitted; a man was supposed to eat with his hands. When beefsteaks became bisexual, the etiquette changed. For generations men had worn their second-best suits because of the inevitability of grease spots; tuxedos and women appeared simultaneously. Most beefsteaks degenerated into polite banquets at which open-face sandwiches of grilled steak happened to be the principal dish. However, despite the frills introduced by women, two schools of traditional steak-dinner devotees still flourish. They may conveniently be called the East Side and West Side schools. They disagree over matters of menu and etiquette, and both claim that their beefsteaks are the more classical or old-fashioned.

The headquarters of the East Side school is the meat market of William Wertheimer & Son, at First Avenue and Nineteenth Street. It is situated in a tenement neighborhood, but that is misleading; scores of epicures regularly order steaks, chops, and capons from Wertheimer’s. The moving

spirit of the East Side school is Sidney Wertheimer, the “son” of the firm. A dozen old, slow-moving, temperamental Germans, each of whom customarily carries his own collection of knives in an old oilcloth kit, are the chefs. Mr. Wertheimer is not a chef. He selects, cuts, and sells the meat used at the majority of the old-fashioned beefsteaks thrown in East Side halls, like the Central Opera House, the Grand Street Boys’ clubhouse, the Manhattan Odd Fellows’ Hall, and Webster Hall. The caterers for these halls get an unusual amount of service when they order meat from Mr. Wertheimer. If the caterer wishes, Mr. Wertheimer will engage a couple of old Germans to go to the hall and broil the meat. He will also engage a crew of experienced beefsteak waiters. He owns a collection of beefsteak-cooking utensils and does not mind lending it out. The chefs and waiters telephone or stop in at Wertheimer’s about once a week and are given assignments. Most of them work in breakfast and luncheon places in the financial district, taking on beefsteaks at night as a sideline. For engaging them, Mr. Wertheimer collects no fee; he just does it to be obliging. In addition, for no charge, he will go to the hall and supervise the kitchen. He is extremely proud of the meat he cuts and likes to make sure it is cooked properly. He succeeded old “Beefsteak Tom” McGowan as the East Side’s most important beefsteak functionary. Mr. McGowan was a foreman in the Department of Water Supply who arranged beefsteaks as a hobby. He was an obscure person, but in 1924 his hearse was followed by more than a thousand sorrowful members of Tammany clubs.

Mr. Wertheimer had almost finished cutting the meat for a beefsteak the last time I went to see him. Approximately three hundred and fifty men and women were expected that night, and he had carved steaks off thirty-steer shells and had cut up four hundred and fifty double rib lamb chops. In his icebox, four hundred and fifty lamb kidneys were soaking in a wooden tub. The steaks and chops were piled up in baskets, ready to be delivered to the uptown hall in which the beefsteak was to be thrown. (Technically, a beefsteak is never “given” or “held”; it is “thrown” or “run”.) Mr. Wertheimer, a pink-cheeked, well-nourished man, looked proudly at the abundantly loaded baskets and said, “The foundation of a good beefsteak is an overflowing amount of meat and beer. The tickets usually

cost five bucks, and the rule is 'All you can hold for five bucks.' If you're able to hold a little more when you start home, you haven't been to a beefsteak, you've been to a banquet that they called a beefsteak.

Classical beefsteak meat is carved off the shell, a section of the hindquarter of a steer; it is called "short loin without the fillet." To order a cut of it, a housewife would ask for a thick Delmonico. "You don't always get it at a beefsteak," Mr. Wertheimer said. "Sometimes they give you bull fillets. They're no good. Not enough juice in them, and they cook out black." While I watched, Mr. Wertheimer took a shell off a hook in his icebox and laid it on a big, maple block. It had been hung for eight weeks and was blanketed with blue mold. The mold was an inch thick. He cut off the mold. Then he boned the shell and cut it into six chunks. Then he sliced off all the fat. Little strips of lean ran through the discarded fat, and he deftly carved them out and made a mound of them on the block. "These trimmings, along with the tails of the steaks, will be ground up and served as appetizers," he said. "We'll use four hundred tonight. People call them hamburgers, and that's an insult. Sometimes they're laid on top of a slice of Bermuda onion and served on bread." When he finished with the shell, six huge steaks, boneless and fatless, averaging three inches thick and ten inches long, lay on the block. They made a beautiful still life. "After they've been broiled, the steaks are sliced up, and each steak makes about ten slices," he said. "The slices are what you get at a beefsteak." Mr. Wertheimer said the baskets of meat he had prepared would be used that night at a beefsteak in the Odd Fellows' Hall on East 106th Street; the Republican Club of the Twentieth Assembly District was running it. He invited me to go along.

"How's your appetite?" he asked. I said there was nothing wrong with it. "I hope not," he said. "When you go to a beefsteak, you got to figure on eating until it comes out of your ears. Otherwise it would be bad manners." That night I rode up to Odd Fellows' Hall with Mr. Wertheimer, and on the way I asked him to describe a pre-prohibition stag beefsteak.

"Oh, they were amazing functions," he said. "The men wore butcher aprons

and chef hats. They used the skirt of the apron to wipe the grease off their faces. Napkins were not allowed. The name of the organization that was running the beefsteak would be printed across the bib, and the men took the aprons home for souvenirs. We still wear aprons, but now they're rented from linen-supply houses. They're numbered, and you turn them in at the hat-check table when you get your hat and coat. Drunks of course, always refuse to turn theirs in.

“In the old days they didn't even use tables and chairs. They sat on beer crates and ate off the tops of beer barrels. You'd be surprised how much fun that was. Somehow it made old men feel young again. And they'd drink beer out of cans or growlers. Those beefsteaks were run in halls or the cellars or back rooms of big saloons. There was always sawdust on the floor. Sometimes they had one in a bowling alley. They would cover the alleys with tarpaulin and set the boxes and barrels in the aisles. The men ate with their fingers. They never served potatoes in those days. Too filling. They take up room that rightfully belongs to meat and beer. A lot of those beefsteaks were testimonials. A politician would get elected to something and his friends would throw him a beefsteak. Cops ran a lot of them, too. Like when a cop became a captain or inspector, he got a beefsteak. Theatrical people were always fond of throwing beefsteaks. Sophie Tucker got a great big one at Mecca Temple in 1934, and Bill Robinson got a great big one at the Grand Street Boys' clubhouse in 1938. Both of those were knockouts. The political clubs always gave the finest, but when Tammany Hall gets a setback. For example, the Anawanda Club, over in my neighborhood, used to give a famous beefsteak every Thanksgiving Eve. Since La Guardia got in the Anawanda's beefsteaks have been so skimpy it makes me sad.

“At the old beefsteaks they almost always had storytellers, men who would entertain with stories in Irish and German dialect. And when the people got tired of eating and drinking, they would harmonize. You could hear them harmonizing blocks away. They would harmonize 'My Wild Irish Rose' until they got their appetite back. It was the custom to hold beefsteaks on Saturday nights or the eve of holidays, so the men would

have time to recover before going to work. They used to give some fine ones in Coney Island restaurants. Webster Hall has always been a good place. Local 638 of the Steamfitters holds its beefsteaks there. They're good ones. A lot of private beefsteaks are thrown in homes. A man will invite some friends to his cellar and cook the steaks himself. I have a number of good amateur beefsteak chefs among my customers. Once, during the racing season, a big bookmaker telephoned us he wanted to throw a beefsteak, so we sent a chef and all the makings to Saratoga. The chef had a wonderful time. They made a hero out of him."

When we reached the hall, we went directly to the kitchen. Two of Mr. Wertheimer's chefs were working at a row of tremendous gas ranges. One had a pipe in his mouth; the other was smoking a cigar. There was a pitcher of beer on a nearby table and at intervals the chefs would back away from the ranges and have some beer. They were cooking the four hundred high-class hamburgers. The air was heavy with the fragrance of the meat.

The steaks, chops, and kidneys were racked up, ready for the broilers. A strip of bacon had been pinned to each kidney with a toothpick. I asked a chef how many minutes the steaks were kept on fire. "It's all according," he said. "Twelve on one side, ten on the other is about the average. Before they go in, we roll them in salt which has been mixed with pepper. The salt creates a crust that holds the juice in." In a corner, waiters were stacking up cardboard platters on each of which a dozen halveslices of trimmed bread had been placed. "This is day-old bread," one of them said. "The steak slices are laid on it just before we take them out to the tables. Day-old bread is neutral. When you lay steak on toast, you taste the toast as much as the steak."

In a little while I went out to the ballroom. The Republicans were arriving. Most of them were substantial, middle-aged people. They all seemed to know each other. At the hat-check booth, everybody, men and women, put on cloth butcher's aprons and paper chef's hats. This made them look a lot like members of the Ku Klux Klan. The hats had mottoes on them, such as "It's Hell When Your Wife Is a Widow" and "Prohibition Was Good for

Some. Others It Put on the Bum.” Before sitting down, most couples went from table to table, shaking hands and gossiping. After shaking hands, they would say, “Let’s see what it says on your hat.” After they read the mottoes on each other’s hats, they would laugh heartily. On each table there were plates of celery and radishes, beer glasses, salt shakers, and some balloons and noisemakers. Later, a spavined old waiter told me that liquor companies send balloons and noisemakers to many beefsteaks as an advertisement. “In the old days they didn’t need noisemakers,” he said contemptuously. “If a man wanted some noise, he would just open his trap and howl.”

While couples were still moving from table to table, a banquet photographer got up on the bandstand and asked everybody to keep still. I went over and watched him work. When he was through we talked for a while, and he said, “In an hour or so I’ll bring back a sample photograph and take orders. At a beefsteak I usually take the picture at the start of the party. If I took it later on, when they get full of beer, the picture would show a lot of people with goggle eyes and their mouths gapped open.”

As the photographer was lugging his equipment out, waiters streamed into the ballroom with pitchers of beer. When they caught sight of the sloshing beer, the people took seats. I joined Mr. Wertheimer, who was standing at the kitchen door surveying the scene. As soon as there was a pitcher of beer in the middle of every table, the waiters brought in platters of hamburgers. A moment later, a stout, frowning woman walked up to Mr. Wertheimer and said, “Say listen. Who the hell ever heard of hamburgers at a beefsteak?” Mr. Wertheimer smiled. “Just be patient, lady,” he said. “In a minute you’ll get all the steak you can hold.” “O.K.,” she said, “but what about the ketchup? There’s no ketchup at our table.” Mr. Wertheimer said he would tell a waiter to get some. When she left he said, “Ketchup! I bet she’d put ketchup on chocolate cake.” After they had finished with their hamburgers some of the diners began inflating and exploding balloons.

I heard one of the chefs back in the kitchen yell out “Steaks ready to go!” and I went inside. One chef was slicing the big steaks with a knife that

resembled a cavalry saber and the other was dipping the slices into a pan of rich, hot sauce. "That's the best beefsteak sauce in the world," Mr. Wertheimer said. "It's melted butter, juice and drippings from the steak, and a little Worcestershire." The waiters lined up beside the slicing table. Each waiter had a couple of the cardboard platters on which bread had been arranged. As he went by the table, he held out the platters and the chef dropped a slice of the rare, dripping steak on each piece of bread. Then the waiter hurried off.

I went to the kitchen door and looked out. A waiter would go to a table and lay a loaded platter in the middle of it. Hands would reach out and the platter would be emptied. A few minutes later another platter would arrive and eager, greasy hands would reach out again. At beefsteaks, waiters are required to keep on bringing platters until every gullet is satisfied; on some beefsteak menus there is a notice: "2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc., portions permitted and invited." Every three trips or so the waiter would bring a pitcher of beer. And every time they finished a platter, the people would rub their hands on their aprons. Sometimes a man would pour a little beer in one palm and rub his hands together briskly. At a table near the kitchen door I heard a woman say to another, "Here, don't be bashful. Have a steak." "I just et six," her friend replied. The first woman said, "Wasn't you hungry? Why, you eat like a bird." Then they threw their heads back and laughed. It was pleasant to watch the happy, unrestrained beefsteak eaters. While the platters kept coming they did little talking except to urge each other to eat more. "Geez," said a man. "These steaks are like peanuts. Eat one, and you can't stop. Have another." Presently the waiters began to tote out platters of thick lamb chops.

Then a man stepped up to the microphone and introduces a number of politicians. Each time he said, "I'm about to introduce a man that is known and loved by each and every on of you," a beaming politician would stand and bow and the constituents would bang the tables with their noisemakers. There were no speeches. A politician would have to be extraordinarily courageous to make a speech at a beefsteak.

When all the Republican statesmen of the Twentieth A.D. had been introduced, a band went into action and two singers stepped out on the dance floor and began singing numbers from "Show Boat." By the time they got to "Ol' Man River," the four hundred and fifty double lamb chops were gone and the waiters were bringing out the kidneys. "I'm so full I'm about to pop," a man said. "Push those kidneys a little nearer, if you don't mind." Then the lights were dimmed. Here and there a couple got up, grunting, and went out on the dance floor. The band played waltzes. Done by aproned, middle-aged people, ponderous with beefsteak and beer, the waltz is an appalling spectacle. The waiters continued to bring out kidneys and steak to many tables. There was no dessert and no coffee. Such things are not orthodox. "Black coffee is sometimes served to straighten people out," Mr. Wertheimer said, "but I don't believe in it."

When the Republicans began dancing in earnest, the activity in the kitchen slackened, and some of the waiters gathered around the slicing table and commenced eating. While they ate, they talked shop. "You know," said one, "a fat woman don't eat so much. It's those little skinny things; you wonder where they put it." Another said, "It's the Cat'lics who can eat. I was to a beefsteak in Brooklyn last Thursday night. All good Cat'lics. So it got to be eleven-fifty, and they stopped the clock. Cat'lics can't eat meat on Friday." The two weary chefs sat down together at the other side of the room from the waiters and had a breathing spell. They had not finished a glass of beer apiece, however, before a waiter hurried in and said, "My table wants some more steak," and the chefs had to get up and put their weight on their feet again. Just before I left, at midnight, I took a last look at the ballroom. The dance floor was packed and clouds of cigar smoke floated above the paper hats of the dancers, but at nine tables people were still stowing away meat and beer. On the stairs to the balcony, five men were harmonizing. Their faces were shiny with grease. One held a pitcher of beer in his hands and occasionally he would drink from it, spilling as much as he drank. The song was, of course, "Sweet Adeline."

The West Side school of beefsteak devotees frequents the Terminal Hotel, a for-gentlemen-only establishment at Eleventh Avenue and Twenty-third

Street. Its chef is Bob Ellis, an aged, truculent Negro, whose opinion of all other beefsteak chefs is low. Of them he says, "What they call a beefsteak ain't no beefsteak; it's just a goddamn mess." Mr. Ellis is also a talented clambake and greenturtle chef and used to make trips as far west as Chicago to supervise one meal. His most unusual accomplishment, however, is the ability to speak Japanese. He once worked on freighters that went to the Orient, and he sometimes reminds people who hang out around the belly-shaped Terminal bar that he has a wonderful command of the Japanese language. When someone is skeptical and says, "Well, let's hear some," he always says haughtily, "What in hell would be the use of talking Jap to you? You wouldn't comprehend a word I was saying."

Among the groups of rough-and-ready gourmands for whom Mr. Ellis is official chef are the I.D.K. ("I Don't Know") Bowling Club, a hoary outfit from Chelsea, and the Old Hoboken Turtle Club. This club was founded in 1796, and Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr were charter members; now it is an exclusive association of West Side and Jersey butchers, brewers, saloonkeepers, boss stevedores, and businessmen. Most of the members are elderly. Mr. Ellis has cooked for them since 1879. In 1929 they gave him a badge with a green turtle and a diamond on it and made him a Brother Turtle. The Turtles and the I.D.K.'s and many similar West Side organizations always hold their beefsteaks in the Terminal cellar, which is called the Hollings Beefsteak Keller after John Hollings, a former owner of the hotel, who sold out in disgust and moved to Weehawken when prohibition was voted in. He used to store his coal in the cellar. Mr. Ellis refuses to call it a Keller; he calls it "my dungeon."

"In the old days all steaks cellars were called dungeons," he told me. "To me they're still dungeons." The dungeon has a steel door on which is printed the initials "O.I.C.U.R.M.T." That is a good sample of beefsteak humor. Also on the door is a sign: "WHEN YOU ENTER THIS KELLER YOU FIND A GOOD FELLER." The dungeon has a cement floor, over which sawdust has been scattered. The ceiling is low. On the trellised wall are yellowed beefsteak photographs ranging from an 1898 view of the M.E. Blankmeyer Clam Bake Club to a picture of a beefsteak thrown in 1932 by

the New York Post Office Holy Name Society. Over the light switch is a warning: "HANDS OFF THE THIRD RAIL." In one corner is a piano and a platform for a German band. The dungeon will hold a hundred and twenty-five persons. "When a hundred and twenty-five big, heavy men get full of beer, it does seem a little crowded in here," Mr. Ellis said. Beer crates and barrels were once used, but now people sit on slat-backed chairs and eat off small individual tables. Down a subterranean hall from the dungeon is the ancient brick oven, over which Mr. Ellis presides with great dignity.

"I'm not one of these hit-or-miss beefsteak chefs," he said. "I grill my steaks on hickory embers. The efflorescence of seasoned hardwood is in the steak when you eat it. My beefsteaks are genuine old-fashioned. I'll give you the official lineup. First we lay out celery, radishes, olives, and scallions. Then we lay out crabmeat cocktails. Some people say that's not old-fashioned. I'm getting close to ninety years old, and I ought to know what's old-fashioned. Then we lay out some skewered kidney shells. Lamb or pig — what's the difference?"

"Then comes the resistance — cuts of seasoned loin of beef on hot toast with butter gravy. Sure, I use toast. None of this day-old bread stuff for me. I know what I'm doing. Then we lay out some baked Idahoes. I let them have paper forks for the crabmeat and the Idahoes; everything else should be attended to with fingers. A man who don't like to eat with his fingers hasn't got any business at a beefsteak. Then we lay out the broiled duplex lamb chops. All during the beefsteak we are laying out pitchers of refreshment. By that I mean beer."

Old Mr. Ellis lives in the Bronx. He spends most of his time at home in a rocking chair with his shoes off, reading the Bible or a weekly trade paper called "The Butcher's Advocate." Whenever Herman Von Twistern, the proprietor of the Terminal, books a beefsteak, he gets Mr. Ellis on the telephone and gives him the date. Usually he also telephones Charles V. Havican, a portly ex-vaudeville actor, who calls himself "the Senator from Hoboken." He took the title during prohibition, when everything connected with Hoboken was considered funny. Mr. Havican is a

celebrated beefsteak entertainer. Most often he sits down with the guests and impersonates a windy, drunken senator. He also tells dialect stories and gives recitations. In his repertoire are “The Kid’s Last Fight,” “Christmas Day in the Workhouse,” “The Gambler’s Wife,” and “Please Don’t Sell My Father Rum.”

“If I am not previously known to people at a beefsteak, I sometimes impersonate a dumb waiter,” Mr. Havican told me, listing his accomplishments. “I spill beer on people, bump into them, step on their feet, and hit them in the face with my elbows. All the time I look dumb. It is a very funny act to people with a keen sense of humor.”

“What do they think of your act?” I asked.

“Well, I tell you,” said Mr. Havican, “look at this scar on my forehead. And I guess you noticed that I walk with a limp.”

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