ON MEAT
AND OTHER TASTY PURSUITS

It started out so simply—I just wanted a really great steak. But after talking with butchers, visiting farms, and paying my respects at a Hoosier abattoir, I found that this craving gave me—and all my fellow carnivores—a lot more than just supper to chew on.

By Renee Wilmeth

Photography by Tony Valainis

At first glance, the one-story building that houses Sander Processing in Celestine, Indiana, looks like any other butcher shop. Inside the front doors, strip steaks, pork loins, and packages of hamburger fill long, low meat cases. Framed in a long glass window, knife-wielding, white-aproned butchers wrestle microwave oven–sized hunks of beef onto tables as they cut them into orderly pieces and package them for sale. To a newcomer, it's not readily apparent that there is more to this family business than simply selling steaks and chops. Really, the only tipoff that Sander isn't your average meat market is the word "processing" in the company's name. In the old days, a "processor" would have been called a "slaughterhouse." At Sander, your steak (or pork chop) walks in the back door on four legs and exits the front door in a little plastic package.

The building has a fairly simple, shotgun layout, each progressive door taking you a step backward in the supply chain. Behind the counter, a door leads to the startlingly cool cutting room. Here Jim Sander, the business's patriarch, is the first man in an assembly line of butchers who carve away on progressively smaller chunks of beef, passing them down the line, making them more and more recognizable as something you'd throw on the grill.

A slight, no-nonsense man, Sander has been at his craft for 40 years now, and he manages a large crew of Sander children and extended family who work in the company. Growing up on a farm in a time when families butchered their own animals, he has been in and out of the business his whole life and finally founded Sander Processing four years ago. In a good year his operation slaughters around 26 cows and 40 hogs a week, processing beef and pork for some of Indiana's top producers. Every fall, during hunting season, the family closes shop for a few weeks to process venison, butchering and packaging nearly 1,000 deer.

Sander's youngest son, Kent (three Sander sons and one daughter work at the family business), leads me through a door in back of the cutting room that leads to another, even colder room, where half-sides of beef hang from the ceiling, aging before they are cut. The giant slabs of beef—all taller than an average man—hang on hooks for two or three weeks at 34 degrees, all the while looking oddly familiar both as animals and as dinner.

We keep walking, and, finally, Kent opens the door to the slaughtering room, where we are hit with a blast of heat—the warmth of life. The room is the size of a large dining room, with high ceilings, simple cinderblock walls, and a concrete floor with a drain in the middle. Everything is wet with fresh water coming from a hose wielded by yet another Sander, wearing yellow rubber boots. Along the ceiling is a system of rails with hooks, chains, and pulleys. Kent points out the only door left in the building—one with a thick metal panel that slides up and down, open just a bit at the bottom, allowing sunlight to seep in. This is the door that the animals use—just the one and only time.

Back out front, in the butchering room, Jim rolls an entire hanging side of dry-aged beef across a ceiling rail and begins to cut it down, starting with the shoulder. Using his long, thin knife with surprisingly little force, he traces a pattern in a muscle apparent only to his trained eye. The shoulder and front leg of what had been an entire cow easily fall away. Then, using what looks like vertical wire but is really a powerful band saw, he cuts large chunks—called "subprimals"—off the main carcass, paring some down into pieces. He passes these down the line to the next son or nephew, who butchers them into even more recognizable steaks, chops, and roasts. They make it look easy, though of course the whole process requires experience and a great deal of skill.

Somehow, seeing these beef and pork carcasses—some so fresh they're steaming—is vaguely satisfying. For a moment, I feel a real connection to my meat again, envisioning a living, breathing animal and knowing that its rib-eye (from the midsection) or tenderloin (from the lower back and side) may very well end up on my plate at one of the finer restaurants in Indianapolis—thanks in part to Jim Sander and the rest of his clan. Some might find the spectacle disgusting, but I am not bothered. A lifelong meat-eater, I like my steak—and seeing my supper in its early stages doesn't distress me. On

We Got the Meat

Indy's voracious appetite for meat started decades before our first steakhouse. Here—from the largest stockyards east of Chicago to the filet on your plate at St. Elmo—notable moments in the evolution of our meat-loving city.

1861

Indianapolis grocer Gilbert Van Camp creates **Van Camp's Pork and Beans**, then nabs a Union Army contract to feed troops during the Civil War.

1873

Construction begins on the **Belt Line Railroad**. Fed by railroad lines, a system of stockyards grows on the banks of White River.

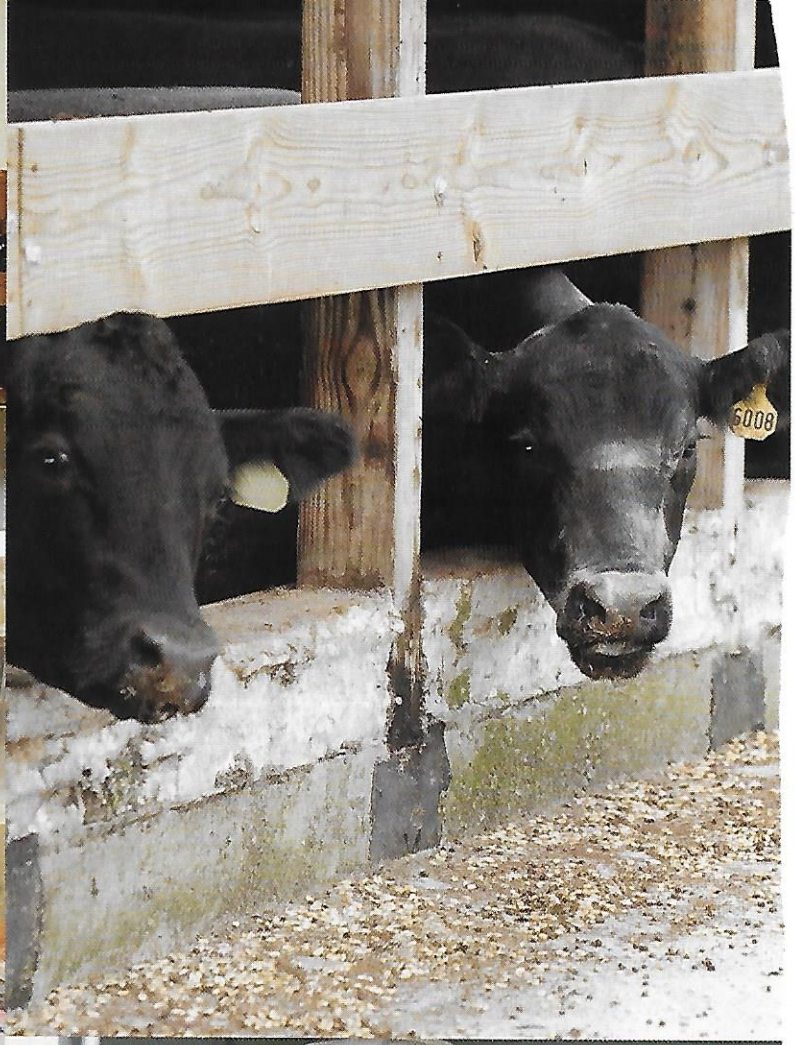
1876

The city of Indianapolis helps finance the **Indianapolis Stockyards**, incorporated as public property for selling cattle, hogs, sheep, and horses.

1902

St. Elmo Steak House, Indy's most famous restaurant, opens as Joe Stahr's Tavern.

IMAGES COURTESY OF INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Clockwise from top left: Owner Joe Lazzara, behind the meat counter at Joe's Butcher Shop and Fish Market in Carmel; cows in the finishing pen at Fischer Farms; Jim Sander, patriarch of Sander Processing, at work; cows in the fields at Fischer Farms.

1909
After 32 years in business, the **Indianapolis Stockyards** have taken in 40 million hogs and 5 million head of cattle.

1911
The first motorized truck delivery of livestock arrives in Indy. Meanwhile, a massive system of feedlots and slaughterhouses grows where the Eli Lilly and Company headquarters and White River Park stand today.

1913
Karl Klemm opens **Klemm's German Sausages & Meats** at the City Market.

1914
Indianapolis canner and packer Frank Van Camp, founds **Van Camp Seafood**; canned tuna becomes a staple in American households.

1921
Kincaid's Meat Market opens on 19th Street and Central Avenue.

the contrary, I see a sort of orderly beauty in the simplicity of the process. Animal to meat: We've been doing it since the very first man cooked his very first steak—and saw that it was good.

Meat is a hot topic these days. From magazine articles to countless books, foodies everywhere are discussing—and, often, hotly debating—bovine growth hormones, grass-fed versus corn-fed, local sourcing, sustainability, and even where to find a great butcher. Michael Pollan's 2006 bestselling rant on commercial cattle-feeding, corn, and sustainability, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, quickly became the most talked-about food book this year. Pollan believes our dependence on corn and corn-fed beef is creating a national environmental crisis. From nitrogen-heavy fertilizers used to produce corn to commercial cattle-feeding operations, Pollan seems to find little to like about beef as he follows a calf from beginning to end. His critics disagree with some of his sustainability projections and downplay his dire pronouncements.

What most commentators do seem to agree on, though, is that in contemporary society, most of us experience a fundamental separation from our food—especially when it comes to meat. In Bill Buford's entertaining and omnivorous *Heat*, the author recounts his yearlong apprenticeship with a butcher in Tuscany. Upon returning to New York, wanting to apply what he had learned in Italy, he procures a whole pig from his local green market: He would do the butchering himself, at home. In describing the sickened reaction from his neighbors as he brought his newly dead pig up the elevator, he makes a striking point: Plenty of people who enjoy a juicy, thick pork chop would turn green if they saw the source.

Growing up in Oklahoma cattle country, I knew exactly how beef on the hoof went from calf to package. There was always half a cow in my parents' freezer, wrapped in white butcher's paper and stamped with red ink: "Flank," "Sirloin," "Stew Meat." Field trips to the local meat-packing plant were a regular occurrence, and meat held little to no mystery or mystique. We weren't bothered by the idea that animals that died for our dinner were probably some of the same cows we passed each day on the way to school.

But today's meat market plays by a mysterious set of new rules. When I started this story, it was supposedly a simple piece about how to get a great steak in Indy. But as anyone who has bought a steak recently can tell you, it isn't that simple. Some say "buying local" guarantees a good (guilt-free) piece of meat, but other camps insist that the absence of hormones and antibiotics trumps any question of the meat's origin. Then you throw in terms like "organic" and "natural"—not to mention the whole corn-finished and grass-fed bits—and there's an entirely new set of issues to consider. And all of a sudden, my most basic desire—a good hunk of meat, if you please—seemed to require expert counsel.

So I called a friend in New York, a food-and-wine writer who also happens to be a butcher's daughter, and asked her what I should look for in a good butcher.

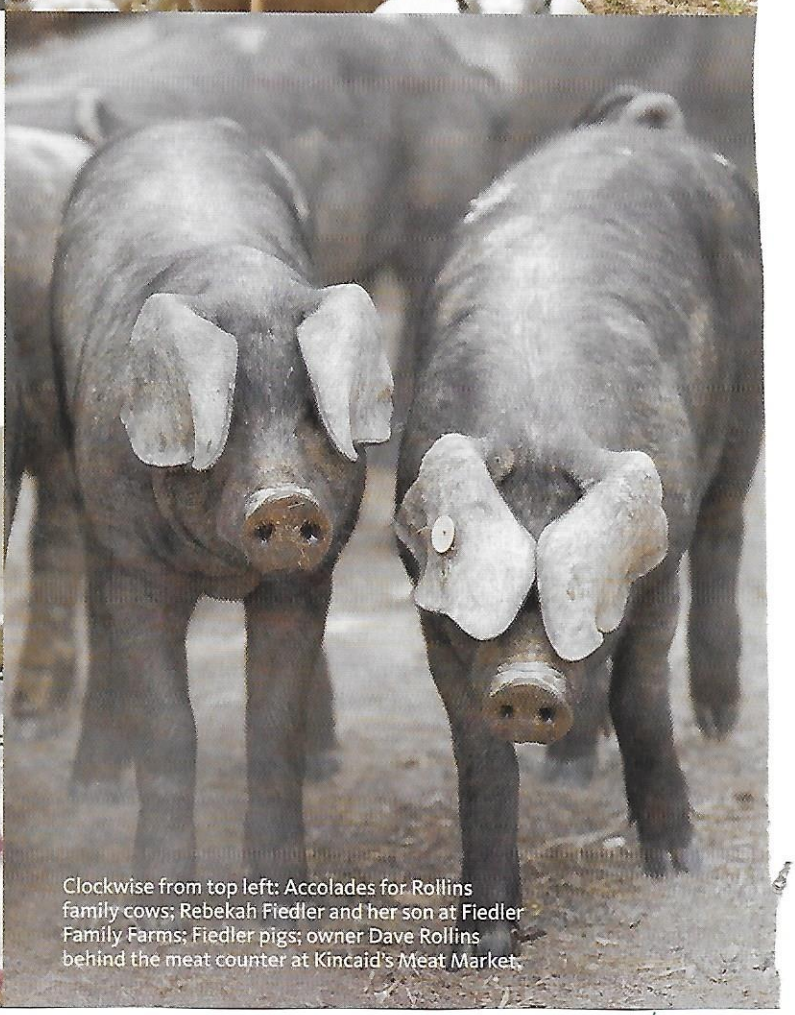
> "Tell us what you're making," says Kincaid's Dave Rollins, "and we'll tell you how to look like a rock star."

She replied that she always looks for someone a little like her dad: "He'll be extremely opinionated," she noted. "He will give advice whether you ask for it or not. And, possibly, he'll be just a little grumpy."

Joe Lazzara, proprietor of Joe's Butcher Shop and Fish Market in Carmel, is not what you would call grumpy. Early on a recent weekday morning, Blackberry in hand, he is already moving at lightning speed, cheerily phoning in a customer's request, checking in with a supplier, and laying meat out in the case. In his sparkling shop on Carmel's trendy Main Street, he is the epitome of the new-school meat-market owner, managing everything from fish orders to beef-price projections with a wireless e-mail connection.

Open since January 2006, Joe's Butcher Shop has found a growing number of regulars in the affluent town. With his wife, Kathy, and veteran butcher Fritz Albright (also decidedly ungrumpy), Lazzara provides high-quality, dry-aged beef and fresh pork (along with chicken and fish) plus gourmet tidbits, delicious chicken salad, and even housemade beef jerky.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND KINCAID'S MEAT MARKET

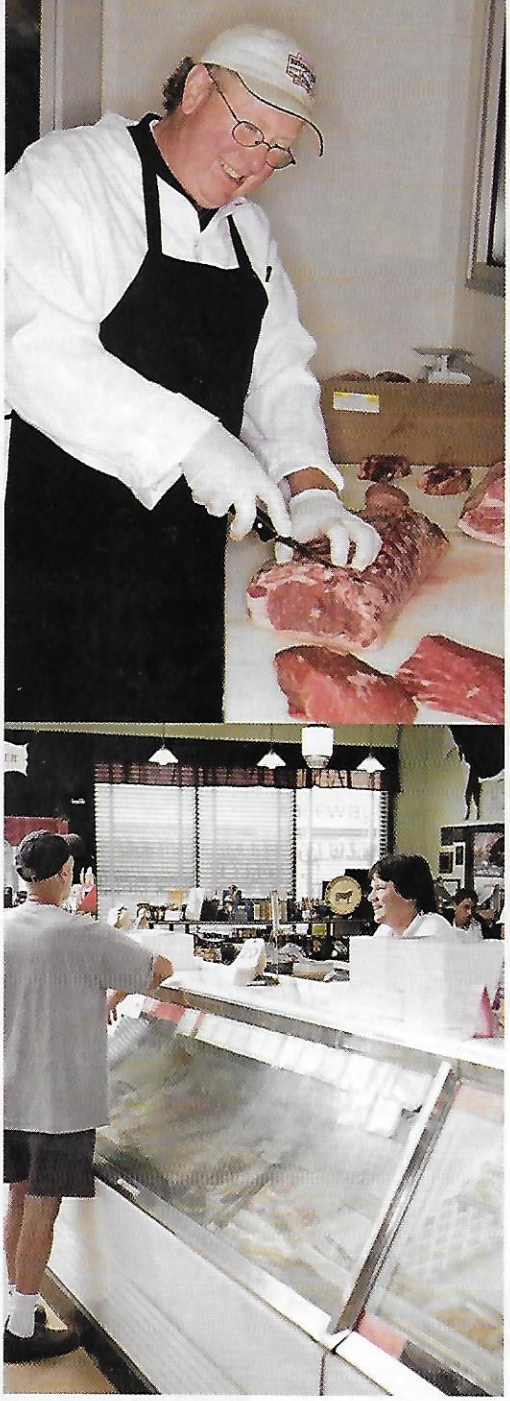


Clockwise from top left: Accolades for Rollins family cows; Rebekah Fiedler and her son at Fiedler Family Farms; Fiedler pigs; owner Dave Rollins behind the meat counter at Kincaid's Meat Market.

Everything in the shop seems shiny and clean, from the gleaming glass cases stocked with USDA Prime steaks to the pine tables loaded with trendy rubs and spices. For his more adventurous customers, Lazzara also sometimes orders "exotics" like alligator or yak loin.

A former telecom manager, Lazzara decided to open the meat market three years ago. Armed with everything from demographic research to commodities projections, he visited producers, processors, and most of his suppliers, seeing firsthand how the animals live and are slaughtered. Today he's well-versed in everything from the marbling in USDA Choice and Prime to the chemistry of dry aging. But butchering itself is a trade, a skill that can take a lifetime to master, so Lazzara enlisted Albright, who ran his own shop in Fort Wayne for 30 years before moving to Indianapolis in 2005.

An old-school butcher of the highest order, Albright chats with me as he works on a large piece of red meat called a subprimal chunk—the type that Jim Sander and other processors cut from a whole carcass or half-side and deliver to butchers. This is standard practice for butchers today; most have stopped buying the whole animal in favor of smaller hunks already cut from processors like Sander or from big national commercial processors like Excel, Swift, and IBC. The quality of the meat is still high, and butchers can still cut their own steaks, but the smaller pieces reduce waste and unsellable meat.



BEFORE IT'S SUPPER. Butcher Fritz Albright (top) gets the meat ready for sale at Joe's Butcher Shop and Fish Market, and Dave Rollins (below) offers advice about his own cuts at Kincaid's Meat Market.

Albright applies what looks like just a little pressure to the meat with his long, thin knife, and a strip falls away gracefully, as if the beef simply peeled itself off into a flatiron steak. He stops to hone his knife on a butcher's steel, flashing the sharp blade down one side and then the other of the long steel rod. It all seems to be second nature to him, a habit as old as his career, and his knife makes a cheerful "swick, swick" sound as metal hits metal. As he finishes, I ask him how he thinks butchers fit in today versus 30 years ago.

"We used to have a lot of ladies who would come in on Friday nights—the night when people got paid," he says. "We would cut down whole carcasses and sell mostly roasts and ground meat for families' dinners."

Today most meat shops are more likely to sell Kobe beef and USDA Prime and Choice—supplies for special occasions—than they are roasts for Sunday suppers. Many consumers forgo the meat counter altogether, relying instead on the supermarket, where they may ask questions about their meat of someone who didn't cut it and doesn't know where it came from.

Kincaid's Meat Market,

the venerable institution at 56th and Illinois, is as old and established as Joe's is shiny and new. It's a sunny weekday morning, and proprietor Dave Rollins (who owns the business with his wife) presides over a busy shop: Butchers are cutting and packaging steaks, customers come and go with orders, and the enormous door to the meat locker is constantly opening and closing with a satisfying "cha-CLUNK." Through it all, Rollins is as mellow as Lazzara is hyperactive, his longish brown hair making him look younger than his 50 years (and far younger than you'd expect a venerable butcher to look). Rollins, who still lives on a family farm and is a bit of a cowboy himself, helps his kids raise their show cattle—or beef on the hoof, as cattle people say—and knows breeds and breeding as well as steaks and chops. Wearing a white apron and standing at a butcher's table, he chitchats between customers about his children's grand-champion steers.

Kincaid's has been around since 1921, when Rollins' grandfather opened a meat shop at 19th and Central Avenue. In 1936, he moved the business to its current location, where it has remained a family operation, passing through Dave's mother and then to Dave. "We were one of the original tenants in this building," he says. "We built the shop around the meat locker, which was so big that it came in pieces on a truck. They couldn't finish the construction on the building until it was installed. We're still proud of her—the old girl ages meat just fabulous."

Kincaid's meat case runs the length of the store and is filled with every imaginable cut of beef, pork, deli meat, and even housemade sausage. Banners for Grand or Reserve Grand Champion steers line the wall—the farm family's equivalent to

a shelf full of football or golf trophies—and this much is clear to everyone: These people know good cows.

Also clear is the sheer delight Rollins finds in great meat—undiminished, it seems, by his years in the business. "The best thing you can tell us is what you're making, because we'll tell you how to look like a rock star," he says. For grilling, he says, you want ribeyes ("They're very forgiving."); for making a good impression—say the boss is coming over for dinner—go with filets wrapped in bacon and rubbed with herbs and freshly ground pepper; for a simple roast, he continues, in earnest, "a chuck roast in the oven with potatoes and onions—just like mom used to make." I start salivating thinking about it, and when I look up I see that Rollins' eyes are rolling back in his head a little bit. We're kindred spirits.

The moment passes, and he goes back to slicing meat. His biggest challenge, he says, is that many customers today aren't willing to take the extra time—and sometimes spend the extra money—for his expertise. Though some of his customers have patronized the shop for more than 50 years, most people are "used to superstores where the meat already comes in that little tray and it's wrapped up," he says. "People pay for convenience, and they're watching pennies. I don't see a store like mine surviving in a new area where they're putting up 500 vinyl houses."

> "Our animals have a great life," says Rebekah Fiedler of Fiedler Farms. "They just have one really bad day."

And there it is again, even in the midst of the butcher shop—that distance between people and their meat. A societal shift made manifest in our real estate and on our dinner plates. Rollins takes me inside the meat locker, which is indeed impressively big, making up a quarter or so of the shop's 1,700 square feet. From the inside, you can see small windows that once allowed people to see the butchers cutting their meat: The cutters would open the windows and hand out the product to the waiting customer. "But customers don't want to see it anymore," Rollins says, "so we built a wall there."

With his words, an image forms in my head—those white-clad butchers, knives in hand, standing in the Kincaid's butchering room all those years ago, watching forlornly as burly construction men walled off their windows so that people might not have to see the meat they'd eat for supper that night. The very thought makes me more determined: I would have my steak, and know it too.

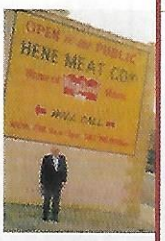
It was time for a roadtrip.

It is a stormy, late-spring day—but not too stormy for Indiana University professor and food writer Christine Barbour and I to put the top down on her convertible for our drive through Southern Indiana's stone passes and rolling hills. Barbour, author of *Indiana Cooks* (and several well-known political-science textbooks), is co-director of the Slow Food group in Bloomington—just the companion to have in a search for the origins of your dinner. The farther off the main road we venture, the more the air is laden with the smell of turkey manure, apparently a popular fertilizer. Finally, 100 miles south of Bloomington and a world away from Indianapolis, just when we think we are lost, we see the lazy, hazy, lush Ohio River and the entrance to Fiedler Family Farms in Rome, Indiana. Jim and Rebekah Fiedler produce—that is, raise for meat—all-natural, 100 percent grass-fed beef, plus pasture-raised pork and lamb, all of which they sell at farmers markets and to chefs around the state.

Rebekah, Jim, and I met last year in Barbour's kitchen at a Slow Food Bloomington potluck, where we discovered that Rebekah hails from a neighboring small town in western Oklahoma. (Her uncle was my junior high school principal!) She and her husband, Jim, an Indiana native, moved here from New York City after 9/11. Rebekah had worked for Cantor Fitzgerald on the 104th floor of the World Trade Center's Tower 2; she was on maternity leave when the planes hit and had no urge to return. Far from that world, the Fiedlers thrive on their bucolic swath of land, a place that seemed to me a good place to unravel the mysteries of today's meat and the army of bewildering terms like "all-natural," "grass-fed," and "hormone-free."

As we climb out of the car, we're surrounded by a flurry of farm life. Dogs are barking, and Susan, a lamb, is bleating so loudly it's difficult to talk. I observe that naming animals seems

1936
Kincaid's Meat Market moves to its current location at 56th and Illinois.



1940s
Indy businessmen Paul and William Hene found **King David hot dogs**, creating a signature all-beef quarter-pound wiener sold in grocery stores and delis around the city.

1954
Indianapolis brothers **Frank and Donald Thomas** are approached by two Florida restaurateurs and asked to invent a new type of grilling machine. Their resulting **flame-broiler** is a hit, and the Florida businessmen call their new chain Burger King.

1957
After patenting their flame-broiler, the Thomases open the first **Burger Chef** in Indy as a showcase for modern restaurant equipment.

SECOND AND THIRD PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF KING DAVID DOGS AND INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, RESPECTIVELY

1967
Eli Lilly and Company buys the site of the **Indianapolis Stockyards**. Also: **Reiswerg's Meat Market and Deli**, a kosher butcher shop, opens in Broad Ripple.

1968
Gerherdt Klemm takes over the now-beloved **Klemm's German Sausage & Meat** and moves to a building on South Street.

1973
Lilly razes the **Indy Stockyards** for its Kentucky Avenue Industrial Center.

1990s
The **Hene Meat Co.** closes. **King David Dogs** disappear.

King David Dogs
An Indy Original

a little odd on a farm where they grow them for food, but Rebekah explains that they only butcher male animals and keep females for breeding. Male cattle, castrated at an early age, are then called steers. Only a few lucky ones are chosen to grow up as bulls, carefully picked for the meat qualities their calves will inherit, like tenderness and marbling.

All of us crowd into the cab of a pickup truck for a tour of the 1,000-plus-acre farm. As we bump along on hilly dirt roads and cross a shallow stream, Rebekah points out areas they'll soon be clearing and planting to grass. The landscape is very different from where Rebekah and I grew up, where a small ranch can be 10,000 acres, and trees are few and far between. There, large herds of hundreds of cows graze on knee-high, dry, yellow grass as they move across treeless, rolling plains. Here, in the river bottoms of Southern Indiana, the humidity hangs visibly in the air while Rebekah shows off new piglets and calves in comfortable pastures of thick green grass.

As Jim moves a herd of red Angus and curly-faced Herefords from one pasture to another, steers ready for sale and almost at their target weight are separated into a barn to be weighed. The colored tags in their ears feature a letter (denoting the year they were born) and a number (for birth order). Out a gate, down a short road, and into another pasture, 40 or so more head of cattle, some with unweaned calves, easily follow the tractor towing a trough of soybean husks and hay. Jim's dog lies down on our feet, a bit put out that we've taken his usual spot on the seat of the ATV.

"My father's grandfather bought the farm after the owners didn't come back from the Civil War," says Dave Fischer.

"The beef industry is oriented around feedlots, but it's beginning to change," Jim says. "As the price of corn continues to go up and more consumers become aware of the environmental issues, we're going to see more small operations producing high-quality grass-fed beef."

But for most large cattle producers, corn and feedlots are a fact of life. The vast majority of cattle raised in the U.S. spend the first six to nine months of their life eating grass, and then are put in a feedlot to eat corn and supplements for the last 3 to 5 months of their lives—a process called "finishing." Corn adds more fat to the meat, fat means marbling, and marbling is the main factor in receiving USDA Prime and Choice grades. Grass-finished meat doesn't have as much fat marbled in it, which means it can be very lean, and sometimes tough, and difficult to cook well. While it's undoubtedly healthier, lots of people say it just doesn't taste as good.

Just before noon, we arrive back at Jim and Rebekah's renovated 1840s farmhouse. Christine and I sit at the kitchen table making a black-bean salad and snacking on goat cheese from Capriole Farm in Greenville, Indiana, while Rebekah fires up the Big Green Egg (an American version of the popular Japanese ceramic cooker) and talks meat with us.

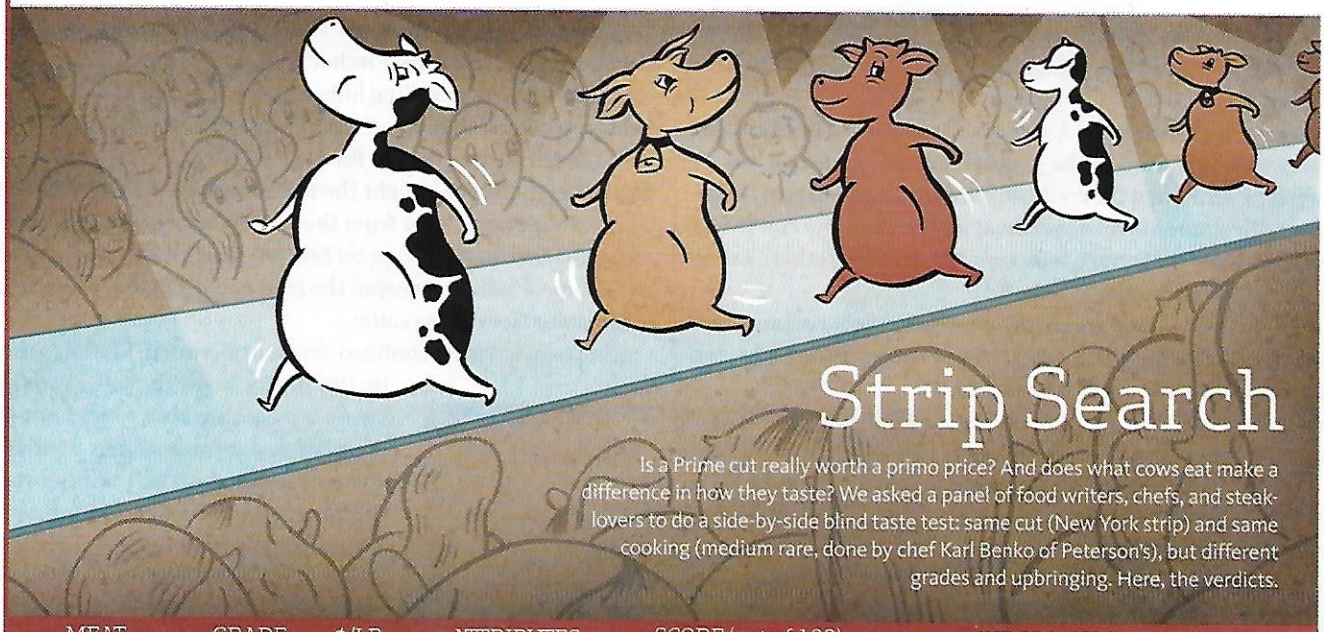
"The problem is that the only formal definition of 'natural' is the government definition," she says, "and the only words it uses are 'minimally processed,' which has nothing to do with hormones or antibiotics."

Many cattle are fed natural or synthetic growth hormones or routinely given antibiotics to keep them healthy in the finishing process. But medical researchers and environmental experts have begun to question how much is making its way into the meat itself. Proponents of bovine growth hormones are confident that the chemical compositions of the proteins don't transfer to the meat or milk; others aren't so sure.

The Fiedlers' meat skips the issue altogether, Rebekah says, eschewing all hormones and antibiotics. "All I want is for people to have informed choices. People should be able to eat whatever they want, and people should have those options." She says this as she hands me a copy of Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, which Jim buys six at a time to give to potential customers.

Unlike the term "natural," "organic" has a formal definition and certification process. Based on USDA standards, 100 percent certified organic beef and pork must be grown on certified organic land, where the animals eat only organic grass and grain. The Fiedlers' land and cattle are qualified for organic certification, but for now, they hold themselves to even more-stringent standards. "We don't really want the government to dictate what we do," Rebekah

BOTTOM IMAGE COURTESY OF KING DAVID DOGS



Strip Search

Is a Prime cut really worth a primo price? And does what cows eat make a difference in how they taste? We asked a panel of food writers, chefs, and steak-lovers to do a side-by-side blind taste test: same cut (New York strip) and same cooking (medium rare, done by chef Karl Benko of Peterson's), but different grades and upbringing. Here, the verdicts.

MEAT	GRADE	$/LB.	ATTRIBUTES	SCORE (out of 100)	JUDGES' COMMENTS
American Kobe	n/a	$40.00 lb.	Indiana Kobe-style from West Lafayette, Indiana	**88** Worth the money?	"Beautiful, thick cut ... great drama on the plate, but a tad weak ... clean and beefy, like a burger ... you can actually see the juice."
USDA Choice	Choice	$14.99 lb.	corn-finished	**85** Great value.	"Gorgeous, fat, deep red ... tender, with a good element of crunchiness ... likeable, but it's a little more work to chew."
USDA Prime	Prime	$14.99 lb.	corn-finished	**83** More marbling doesn't always take the day.	"Very creamy texture ... variegated in and out, and drier than it looks ... moist, tender, and softly buttery ... decent flavor."
"All-natural"	n/a	$12.98 lb.	hormone-free, antibiotic-free, and corn-finished	**84** The corn debate continues.	"Looks a little skinny, but tastes very tender ... chewy, in a pleasant way ... a tough finish, but still good ... very appealing."
"All-natural"	n/a	$11.00 lb.	hormone-free, antibiotic-free, and 100 percent grass-fed	**88** Tasty—and maybe even good for you.	"Only a little appealing on the outside, but nice and pink within ... good flavor, not overly rich ... tender, still chewy but smooth."
USDA Select	Select	$10.49 lb.	thin cut	**67** Don't select this.	"Texture is tough and chewy ... not bad ... dry inside ... hard to swallow ... filled with hard fat, not the buttery kind."
Pre-packed Wal-Mart	Choice	$9.32 lb.	thin cut	**58** Door-greeter doubles as butcher?	"Thin, flat, and gray ... too thin, and fibrous ... fights the knife, but not the teeth ... tough and chewy, but not horrible."
Sutton and Dodge brand, pre-packed from Target	Choice	$8.49 lb.	thick cut	**96** Surprise: You *can* sometimes find a great cut at a grocer—and for cheap.	"Fantastic appearance ... the perfect chew ... the best texture of all ... needs age ... my favorite meat ... tender, juicy, and succulent."

ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN SNOOK

says, "and there are medications allowed under organic certifications—like the de-wormer Ivomec—that we don't believe in using."

A board member of the American Grass Fed Association, she expresses frustration at the general lack of regulation among marketing terms and the confusion, even among those in the industry. "Restaurants mislabel meat all the time and call things 'grass-finished' that aren't," she says. "It's fraud, but there are no remedies or regulations."

"Chefs themselves are pretty confused, too," Barbour says from her seat across the table. "They know it's trendy, and they know it's supposed to be better. There are two issues at work here: A vocabulary issue and a veracity issue."

Lunch, when it's done cooking, comes from R-9 and R-15, steers slaughtered earlier this summer. Producers like the Fielders carefully track the bloodlines of animals—especially bulls—to ensure the quality of the meat. R-15 is a little tastier, but both are delicious, hormone-free, antibiotic-free, 100 percent grass-fed steaks—from mellow, happy cows, according to Rebekah. "Our animals have a great life," she says. "They just have one really bad day."

Cattle are a second career for Dave Fischer, too. Five years ago, Fischer was a software consultant who had prospered in the dot-com boom. But after finishing a large contract in Germany, he and his wife, Diana, decided it was time to move their family back to their mutual hometown, Jasper, where their children could all go to the same school and grow up around grandparents and cousins. Dave took over the family farming business in Schnellville, Indiana, and converted Fischer Farms into a top producer of all-natural beef.

A tall, relaxed guy in a light-brown workshirt, Fischer is the epitome of the modern—and extremely intelligent—farmer. He's also successful: Fischer Farms beef is served in fine-dining restaurants across the state, including Elements and The Oceanaire Seafood Room in Indianapolis and Restaurant Tallent in Bloomington. But there's one difference between Fischer's all-natural, hormone-and-antibiotic-free beef and the beef from Fiedler Farms: Fischer's cows eat corn.

Looking out over rolling hills of grass, it's hard to believe the fields were once all planted with corn and soybeans, grown on land the family had owned for nearly 150 years. "They say my father's grandfather bought the farm from the sheriff after the owner didn't come back from the Civil War," Fisher says as we navigate narrow, steep ruts on his Kubota ATV. After he moved back home, Fischer surveyed the land and decided it was much better suited for raising cattle.

Unlike in a typical confined-feeding operation, Fischer's cattle live pretty cushy lives. Forty or so steers are comfortably spread out in their large pens for finishing, with dry dirt and sawdust under their hooves, sheltered from the sun under a roof with a breeze blowing through the open sides of the building, a former chicken house. There's a watchful barn cat following us as we walk.

Fischer says the key to successfully producing antibiotic-free beef is to start with good stock and keep the animals healthy. Truckloads of sawdust help keep the cattle's hooves dry during the finishing process. (In more-traditional feedlots, cows constantly stand in wet muck, causing what producers call "the sniffles.")

Like most small producers, Fischer times his production—when calves are born—so he can process cattle year-round. He has about 250 head on his 750-or-so acres. In a given week, to meet his 250 customers' needs, he sends three steers to slaughter. Fischer emphasizes his meat as premium, natural, and local. "I believe in being specialized," he says, "in doing one thing really well. You can get the crops and breed right and get a great-tasting steak, but you have to do it consistently." And to his taste, finishing cattle on corn produces a higher-quality, better-tasting steak.

I get to taste it myself at lunch, a welcoming family affair with the Fischer kids at home around the kitchen table. Diana grills meltingly tender Fischer filets served with vegetables and fruit salad. While simple, the meal is also simply amazing. Tender and rich, the steak is the kind

Halal Things Considered

Once a week, a Greenwood processor is home to an ancient technique.

It's Aboo Durvesh's first day on the job.

He's come to work at Archer's Meats & Catering in Greenwood early on a cool morning, ready to perform the Muslim process for slaughter, called halal killing. Many Indianapolis-area ethnic restaurants and international markets purchase their halal meat (beef, lamb, and goat) from Archer, which brings in a practicing Muslim to perform the rituals and blessings one day a week at both the Greenwood and Fishers locations.

In Arabic, "halal" means "allowed," a label noting that the meat has been butchered in accordance with Muslim religious practices. Similar to kosher butchering, halal killing is considered by its devotees cleaner than standard butchering, because the slaughtering process allows blood and other impurities to work themselves out in the killing. An animal is typically knocked out and then turned to face Mecca before a Muslim butcher cuts its jugular veins, blessing every fallen cow, goat, and lamb for its service to Allah and man.

"We're actually following a tradition established by Abraham," Durvesh explains as he makes two slits in a lamb's throat with a long, sharp boning knife. Two men bring in the next unconscious lamb and remind Durvesh he doesn't have much time. It's important that he hang the animal before it dies so that the muscle contractions of the body will pump out the blood. As the animal is hoisted up to be finished, another is brought in, and Durvesh steps to the animal, makes his cuts in the throat, and turns back, full of joy and thankfulness to receive another lamb. Durvesh seems to be doing pretty well for his first day.

"Halal killing is about both the physical part and the spiritual part," he explains. "We thank Allah for creating these animals for service. They were created for us to nurture our physical bodies, and we are created for Him." —*R.W.*

your mouth remembers weeks later and waters—one of the best I've had all year.

After lunch, Dave asks if I want to head into nearby Celestine to see the farm's processor—Jim Sander. A short pickup ride later, I'm back at Sander Processing, the nondescript building bathed in unrelenting sun. Out back, their slight movements barely visible from the parking lot, a few pigs lazily flick their tails in the heat. They have no idea what is coming.

It's a Tuesday, and Sander is processing pigs. The medium-sized pinkish-white porkers with a painted red stripe down their backs for identification are clean, seemingly happy animals. They seem happy, in fact, right up to the end.

Before we join them in the slaughtering room, we walk through the butchering room and into the cooler, which is blissfully cold and stocked with 60 or so large sides of beef. A few carcasses hanging high on hooks are retired dairy cows destined for hamburger and ready to butcher, while a few of Fischer's carcasses are still aging their 14 days. It's easy to see the difference between the recently slaughtered meat, still red and fatty, and the aged beef, dry and tough on the outside with less visible fat. The aging process reduces moisture content and breaks down some of the tougher proteins. Some butchers and chefs, going for even more tenderness, age individual cuts longer—either in the plastic packaging, known as "wet" aging, or on racks in the open, called "dry aging."

We leave the aging meat, and I'm hit by the blast of wet heat as we enter the room where they're slaughtering the pigs. It's hard to tell if the warmth comes from the door that opens to allow the pigs entry, or if it's simply the aggregated body heat of the animals. I'm also struck by the smell of the space—or rather, the complete lack of it. Thanks to the constant spray of water on the floor, the room is wet and steamy—but also completely odorless, and clean.

The process is simple, and surprisingly bloodless. The pigs are led two-by-two into a roughly four-by-six-foot pen. One pig at a time is killed with a clean, neat rifle shot to the head. There is no noise—not a squeal or a grunt—just a sharp "POP" from the gun. The remaining animal is placidly unaware—merely inconvenienced, if anything, at having to step over his fallen comrade.

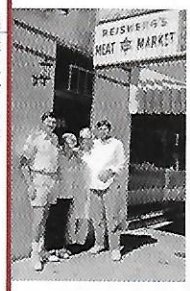
As the newly dead animal is raised up on a hook, it's cut across the throat so blood can drain tidily into a barrel. It's a bit disconcerting to see the body still twitching, but the muscle contractions are important, helping to pump most of the blood out early. Once the death throes are over, there is actually little mess. Within a minute or two, the pig is dehoofed, skinned, and gutted. A meat inspector calmly sifts through the bloodless innards, all identifiable from biology class. The kidneys and heart are retrieved, while the intestines are thrown away. In five minutes, our animal has gone from squirming porker to fresh pork.

People see meat as "an abstraction," Buford writes, after lugging home his own pig. "People don't think of an animal when they use the word; they think of an element in a meal. ('What I want tonight is a cheeseburger!')."

For most of us, that's a comfortable place to be, but if you want to live—to eat—thoughtfully, you have to do a little looking around. I had been looking for the best way to get a great steak—in a city where every other restaurant is a steakhouse, no less—and even I was surprised at just how far I had to go to really connect to the source. Still, as Hoosiers, we're a lucky breed of carnivore with easy, local access to lots of cows. We have hormone-free cows, and antibiotic-free cows, cows that eat grass, and cows that eat corn. And while the farmers who raise the cows—and even modern science—can't seem to dispel all of the mysteries about which is "best" and why, it does seem clear that, when you have questions, you can find answers.

If it's important to you and your family whether or not your beef was injected with bovine growth hormones, these professional purveyors of flesh—in the store, in the butcher shop, at the farmers markets—should be able to tell you what to buy, and what to skip. You certainly don't have to buy the whole hog (a la Buford) or meet your cow in person to find and appreciate good meat. Most likely, reconnecting starts simply by learning to look again. Most butchers say that you can generally trust your eyes: If the cut looks tasty and beautiful in the raw, it will likely taste good off the grill. And don't be afraid to ask. You might just find a butcher who can sell you your meat, slice you a star cut, and then tell you how to cook it. And who may—or may not, if he's a Hoosier—be just a little bit grumpy.

1994
Reiswerg's Meat Market and Deli, the last kosher butcher in Indiana, closes.

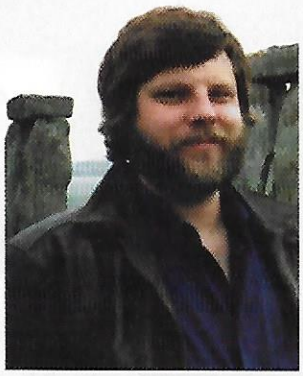


2006
Joe's Butcher Shop opens in Carmel. **King David Dogs** reopens on Pennsylvania Street using the original recipe. Also: **St. Elmo Steak House** is one of the top 50 grossing independents in the country, according to *Restaurants and Institutions* magazine.

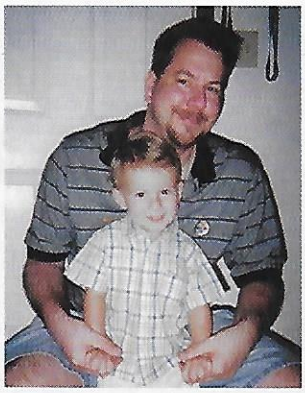
2007
Gerherdt Klemm's nephew, Claus Muth, moves the shop—renamed **Claus' German Sausage & Meats**—into a new building on Shelby Street.

PHOTOGRAPH TOP COURTESY OF THE REISWERG FAMILY

Contributors



Freelance writer **Chris Hodapp** became a Freemason after seeing a Masonic funeral service performed for his father-in-law in Texas. After just six years in the secretive society, he wrote *Freemasons for Dummies* (Wiley) in 2005, and then in 2006 penned *Solomon's Builders: Freemasonry, Founding Fathers and the Secrets of Washington D.C.* (Ulysses Press). In "The Da Indy Code" (p. 52), Hodapp explores the Masonic connections in some Indianapolis landmarks, including the Scottish Rite Cathedral and Murat Shrine Temple. Hodapp works as a commercial filmmaker with Dean Crow Productions.



In reporting on the tough-as-nails former Purdue football player Willie Jones for "Hidden Talent" (p. 74), freelance writer **Ed Krzemienski** found him to be a gentle soul. "He is one of the kindest and most grounded individuals I have ever met," Krzemienski says. Our story follows Jones from Robstown, Texas, to Evansville, where he lived with a family the summer prior to his first season at Purdue. Krzemienski (pictured with son Edward Joseph) has written on college and pro football, including work in ESPN's *College Football Encyclopedia* and *XL Super Bowl: The Opus*.

When **Renee Wilmeth** was assigned to write "On Meat" (p. 112), *Indianapolis Monthly* editor David Zivan presented her with a chart of a cow with the headline "Beef Made Easy." "Later, up to my own brisket in research, interviews, field trips, and questions about grass-fed beef, all-natural producers, and what tasted better, I found there was no 'easy' to beef today," Wilmeth says. "It's a complicated topic, but a timely one in Indiana—we're lucky to have a significant number of high-quality producers." Wilmeth is publishing director at Literary Architects. She also writes a popular food blog (feedmedrinkme.blogspot.com).

Freelance illustrator **Michael Witte** provided artwork for this month's Life Lessons ("True Brit," p. 62) on the English-Speaking Union. A longtime Anglophile, Witte graduated from Princeton University, where he majored in English. He also owns a nearly complete run of bound volumes of *Punch*, the British humor magazine, that published from 1841 to 1970. Witte says he takes considerable pleasure in portraying snooty Brits with elevated noses but, during his 30-year career as an illustrator, has kept his own Midwestern nose (he's a St. Louis native) pressed firmly to the grindstone. His work has been published in *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, and *Time*.