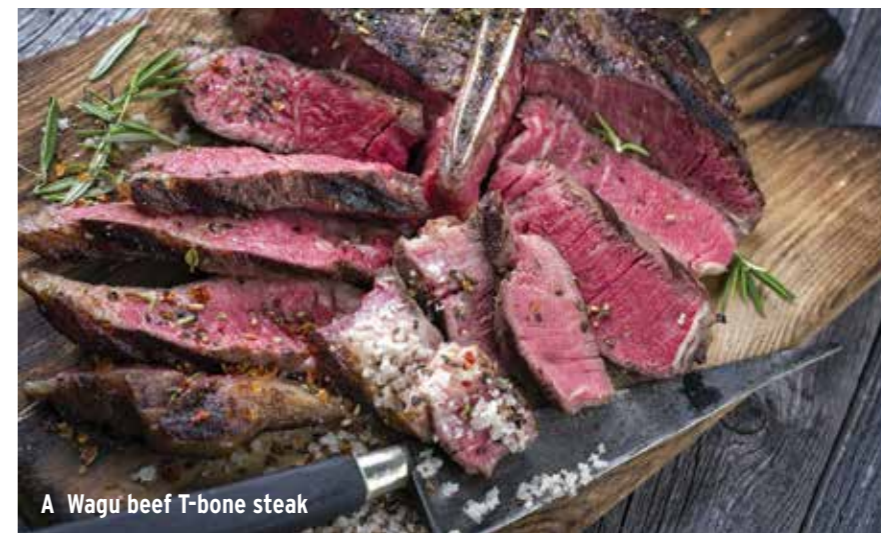


Tomahawk steak – a spectacular cut for entertaining



“Using state-of-the-art packaging, in chilled and insulated cartons and delivered only a matter of three or four days from placing an order, the expertly prepared meat arrived in impeccable condition for immediate use”



A Wagyu beef T-bone steak

Mail-order meat comes of age

Oven-ready gourmet meat meals have boomed during the pandemic as top restaurants produce ‘At Home’ versions of their menus.

Graham Sherwood enjoys an up-market ‘meal-box’

AS THE nation’s economy and our own finances have waxed and waned over the years, we as consumers have often ‘cut our cloth’ accordingly, choosing to spend the money we would have spent eating out on eating in at home instead.

The rise of the ‘ready-meal and bottle of wine supper’ was one of the first innovations to such occasional economy, a phenomenon quickly seized upon by the canny supermarket companies, eager to capture those customers who had decided to trade-up.

The unprecedented enforced government lockdowns of the hospitality sector during the Covid pandemic also bore witness to similar changes to consumer behaviour, albeit this time not so closely aligned to

prudent economy but rather to necessity. As we the public were prohibited from eating out, indeed from dining anywhere, the established purveyors of mail order food began to experience an incredible rise in demand for their wares. Unsurprisingly, the typical takeaway-style businesses flourished, utilising the burgeoning home-delivery companies and subsequently the widespread extension of ‘click and collect’ services.

What also began to emerge was an increasing trade in high-end meat sales, notably steaks and pre-butchered and prepared select cuts of meat, produced oven-ready for a growing market for up-market dinner parties at home. Companies such as Donald Russell, Meat Direct, Douglas Willis and The Meat Box Company, all long-standing players in this sector –

although generally regarded as expensive when viewed against the supermarkets – were quick to see sales rise significantly.

As gymnasiums and sports centres were also forced to lock down, direct sales of low-fat, pre-prepared meats also experienced buoyant increases. Companies like Muscle foods, selling reduced-fat burgers, meatballs, steaks, sausages, barbecue marinated meats and several skinless poultry options, normally aimed at the fitness and weight-loss market, saw their business enter the mainstream for the first time.

However, as our forced incarceration began to bite, with little else to spend our money on, and the desire for a bit of luxury beginning to take hold, more and more customers were tempted to go up-market by purchasing a gourmet meat-fest. Using

state-of-the-art packaging, in chilled and insulated cartons and delivered only a matter of three or four days from placing an order, the expertly prepared meat arrived in impeccable condition for immediate use.

Very quickly, new operators joined the fray, offering gourmet meat meals (in a box) which could also include side orders of vegetables and even an accompanying dessert. Well-known restaurants, some with Michelin stars, turned disaster into opportunity with increasing flamboyance, by adding menu cards, cooking tips and wine suggestions to further embellish this new business. Celebrity chefs like Heston Blumenthal, Rick Stein, Tommy Banks and Mark Birkhall all began to produce ‘At Home’ versions of their menus.

The closure of luxury goods and gift shops also meant that mail-order meal-box ideas became suitable and much appreciated alternatives as birthday, Christmas and/or special anniversary presents.

At a stroke, the somewhat restricted basic choice of meat held by supermarkets

quickly palled against the increasingly exotic range of cuts being offered by online butchers. Previously having only traded in the high street retail area, they were now eager to claim some of this new internet business. Wholesalers became retailers with new aplomb, relishing the opportunity to cut out the cost of the middlemen now in lockdown.

As well as the usual sirloin and rump steaks on offer, less well-known cuts began to find a fresh clientele. Cuts like fillet, ribeye, tomahawk, bavette, hanger-steaks, flat-iron, featherblade and picahana steak offerings all found new customers out of necessity during the pandemic. Exotic beef cuts such as Kobe-style Wagyu beef, previously mainly supplied only to A-list restaurants and stores like Harrods, found their way onto online price lists. Mail-order meat had definitely come of age.

While there is an element of ‘letting the genie out of the bottle’ syndrome about the rise in ordering gourmet meats online, it is most likely that this level of interest, if not actually sustained following the pandemic, will still be an additional income stream for those restaurants which are often fully booked up with three-month waiting lists. By offering the main elements of their menus by mail order, they will be able to satisfy a greater number of their aspiring clientele, with little in the way of additional overheads as these so-called ‘At Home’ boxes carry a premium price. From the consumers’ point of view, albeit relatively expensive, these

gourmet offerings are cheaper than visiting the restaurants themselves.

As the hospitality sector gets back to the new normal, at the time of writing it is still a little unclear what this situation will look and feel like; undoubtedly the peak trade in mail order meats will have passed and usual supply routes will have been re-established.

On a personal note, I was lucky enough to have celebrated my 50th wedding anniversary during lockdown, albeit a very ‘small bubble’ affair and definitely not the grand event that my children had talked about and planned

for before the virus took full control of all our lives. Even so, we received a very exotic ‘celebrity chef’ home-delivered meal-box at their behest and thoroughly enjoyed it. As a result, we reciprocated the gift to a friend celebrating a significant birthday

and received a similar reaction.

At the time of writing there are no clear statistics yet which analyse the enduring disturbance effect that the three Covid-19 lockdowns have had on the various parts of the hospitality industry – which will recover fully, which ones will maintain their forced diversification and, sadly, those which will have permanently gone to the wall.

What I do know is that those of us who have tasted a little bit of luxury dining, in the comfort of our own homes via mail order, might – just might – repeat the experience, and will definitely share the privilege with others when the opportunity presents itself.