

Prime cuts

How does the meat you eat actually end up on your dinner plate? Who farms it, slaughters it, transports it, treats it, processes it and sells it? And how? Going up the food chain, we reveal the different stages your prime cut goes through, getting a few tips from the specialists on what exactly makes good meat.

Photographer GRÉGOIRE PLEYNET Interviews SARAH SCHUG



Ready for deboning



Filip Van Teemsche, purchasing manager, research and development



Loins with bellies waiting to be deboned



Locks' assembly line: Every person takes care of a different step in the process. Here, the bellies are being deboned.



Deboning the shoulders.

LOCKS Deboning factory, Ghent

We've all been to the local butchers and know what a slaughterhouse is, but have you ever heard of a deboning company? Locks, founded in 1982 by Joseph Locks is exactly that. Employing 120 people, the business takes care of removing the bones from pigs' dead bodies. Every week, Belgian slaughterhouses deliver 550 tons of pig meat to Locks where loin, rump, shoulders, legs and necks get deboned by hand on an assembly line in rooms that are kept at six degrees. "It's like in the automobile sector," Filip Van Teemsche

explains: "Everyone has his or her own little task." Only the final packaging is done by machines. But why is deboning necessary? "Everything needs to be deboned because otherwise it's impossible to process it," Van Teemsche clarifies: "The only thing that is sold with bones are the ribs." Whilst most of the bone-free meat is exported and turned into ham or meatballs at other locations, some parts stay at Locks and get directly made into the final product that you're likely to find in your supermarket's meat section, such as marinated tender loins for example. "That's my favourite part," Van Teemsche tells us: "I like the creativity, creating a

completely new product. When I was in Italy I saw the Pancetta and thought: 'Why can't we do that with fresh meat?' And now you can find a fresh, grilled Pancetta in Belgian supermarkets." Interestingly, only 8 percent of the company's deboned meat actually stays in Belgium. Whilst the shoulder meat is mainly used for the Belgian "boulette", the skin goes to the Philippines (to make chips) and the bellies mainly to Japan and South Korea, where they are used in soups.

locks.be



Three whole lambs ready to be cut



The stamp on the shoulder of the lamb shows that it comes from Scotland



T-bone and Porterhouse steaks



Manager Julia Craige-McQuaide with her colleague Wesley



Lamb cutlets that have just been cut on the block



A loin of beef which has just been cut into a fillet, a T-bone and a sirloin on the bone



JACK O'SHEA
Butchers, Brussels

Jack O'Shea, who has one branch in London and one in Brussels, is widely known for its high-quality meat. Ever since 1988, the butcher sells everything from Irish beef and lamb to bio-labelled pork produced in the Belgian Ardennes. Its clients include run-of-the-mill customers but also established restaurants such as Gaudron or Rouge Tomate in Brussels. When the meat is delivered, Jack O'Shea's three trained butchers get to work and cut it into smaller pieces and process it into ham or sausages – everything is home-made. But how

do you recognize high quality meat? What are the criteria? "Good meat is well marbled, with the fat having a creamy colour. It needs to be firm instead of floppy, not watery and also not bright red as on supermarket shelves," manager Julia Craige-McQuaide explains: "Beef needs to have aged, and when it is bright red it has not." At Jack O'Shea, the ageing process is taken very seriously. After the arrival (about 400 kg a week), the beef gets stored in big fridges with circulating air, for anything from three to six weeks maximum. "Through the ageing the beef gets more tender and the flavour more intense because the enzymes break down the muscles," Julia goes on. To ensure that all products are of

the best quality, founder Jack O'Shea regularly visits his suppliers to check what and how they are producing. All the meat that is sold in the shop comes from small farms and free-range, grass-fed animals. "That's more important than an organic label," Julia clarifies. "You can receive the label just because of what you feed the chickens, even if you hold them in little cages."

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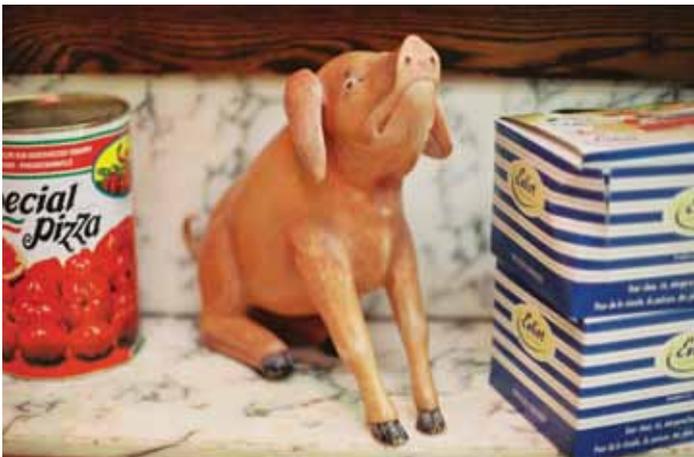
Freshly cut roast beef



All products that go over the counter are fresh and nothing is ever vacuum-packed



Jean Gheysels, in business since five generations, attracts customers from all walks of life



JEAN GHEYSELS Butchers, Brussels

Gheysels is one of Brussels' most historic butchers. For five generations it has been selling top quality meat to its customers, which include everyone from homeless people to politicians and 300 restaurants all over Belgium and Northern France. Up until 2000, the Gheysels used to hang the carcasses of pigs or sheep on hooks in the ceiling all around the shop. But AFSCA, a Belgian organisation responsible for controlling the

food production chain, revised the laws and forbade the traditional procedure. It also imposed a number on each piece of meat to make it completely traceable. "With the help of this number, we can check everything: Who its parents were, how it was fed, where and how it lived," owner Josiane Gheysels explains. The family business has been working with the same suppliers for 50 years now: "They know exactly which kind of quality we want and we know that we can rely on them," says Josiane. Most products come from Belgian animals, with a few exceptions:



"Some of the beef we import from Argentina and lamb from New Zealand – it is their specialty and thus better than ours," Josiane explains. The meat that arrives at Gheysels comes directly from the slaughterhouses, and the butchers debone and cut the carcasses themselves. What's more, Gheysels make its own cold cuts and sausages, up to four times a day.

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Enrico Bouleau, farmer and butcher



As Muslims do not eat pork, Enrico makes poultry sausages



His favorite beef comes from the French Limousin cattle

BOUCHERIE HALAL TEMPOUX

Enrico Bouleau knows his stuff. His parents were sheep farmers and his grandpa worked as a cattle dealer. After almost 20 years as a stockman, he decided to open a so-called Halal butchery – one that operates in accordance with Muslim rules. “I wanted to create a chain that goes directly from the farmer to the customer, a chain that I can control,” Bouleau says. On his farm he keeps about 300 sheep and between three and five of them are slaughtered for the butcher each week. For that, they are transported to a Halal slaughterhouse in Charleroi where a specially trained slaughterer, who is certified by the Brussels mosque, takes care of the killing. “In non-Halal slaughterhouses the animals are either electrocuted or

shot in the brain,” Bouleau explains: “Here, we cut their throats. It’s a cleaner and healthier method because they bleed out, all the blood flows out and it has a bright red colour. When you kill an animal by a shot in the head, the blood becomes very dark.” But is there also a difference when it comes to the taste? “No,” he freely admits. “What changes the taste is how you raise an animal, not how you kill it. But Halal meat is drier whilst normal meat gives off a lot of bloody juice.” The peak of the business is the yearly Festival of Sacrifice, when Muslim families slaughter a sheep as a sacrifice for their god. “Most families already come to the farm now to choose their lamb although the festivities are only in October,” Bouleau says: “Last time I had to cut up 86 lambs in one day.” Whilst the products in

the butchery stem from young female lambs that are between two and six months old, the religious holiday requires the slaughter of male sheep which have to be older than nine months. And the younger the animal, the softer the meat. But Bouleau also sells beef, especially the Limousin kind, the best in his opinion. Every Sunday he visits a few farms to choose the cows in order to ensure the best quality: “I only take females, because the meat of the males is too dry.” Chicken is on the menu too, delivered from the single Belgian Halal poultry slaughterhouse in Antwerp.

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Cattle carcasses in the fridge



Pigs' carcasses after the cooling process on their way to the cutting workshops



After the killing, cows are skinned, cut open and their entrails removed on an assembly line



The hair of the pig is removed with fire



Pigs just after the exsanguination stage

ABATAN Slaughterhouse, Brussels

Anderlecht's historical site, which spreads out across hectares, has been used since the 19th century to slaughter animals, and for many years also hosted a big cattle market. Today, no less than 700 people work at the site on a daily basis and the iron cast construction that dates back to 1890 still serves as a venue for a fresh meat market three times a week. The slaughterhouse, where 230,000 animals arrive each week, has two slaughter lines: One for pigs, who are electrocuted and then exsanguinated, and one for larger

animals such as calves, horses and deer who are shot in the head and then exsanguinated after. All sheep are slaughtered with the Halal method in accordance with Muslim rules. After their death, the animals are hung on an assembly line and well-trained cutters take care of removing the skin, taking out the entrails and cutting the animal in two pieces. At the end of the chain, a veterinarian inspects each carcass and in case of illness they are put aside. "Whilst the cows and bulls each have a number assigned to them, making it possible to trace each one individually, pigs are only numbered in groups: There are just too many," Jan Van Assche, responsible for

quality control, explains. The slaughter and preparation of one single animal takes about 30 minutes. The approved pieces end up on the cutting tables of a number of butchers who have their studios (30 in total) directly at the site, and who are responsible for deboning and transforming the carcasses into even smaller pieces which are then transported to butchers all over Belgium.

abatan.be

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