



A Café Sam Report: Wet or Dry Aged – What's Your Beef?

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In the back left corner of the Centre Ave. Whole Foods store, next to the meat counter, there is a glass panel that allows you to look into a walk-in cooler and stare at whole beef strip loins that are “dry aging.” For many, the glass panel provides a first opportunity to see the dry-aging technique in progress, and the sight is quite mesmerizing. There’s something about the look of mold on the beef that gives an impression (oddly) that these large pieces of meat are going to be cut down into individual steaks that will taste really great.

Then you slide down the counter to find the butchered cuts, see the prices, and sadly conclude that those steaks are intended for the customers with very deep pockets. And you move on.

Why is it so expensive? That’s a good question, because by the looks of it dry aging is nothing more than beef sitting on a refrigerator rack. Indeed, dry aging is a fairly simple process (more of an art than a science) whereby meat, without packaging, is stored for up to five weeks after slaughter. During that time, the natural enzymatic and biochemical aging process in the meat proceeds in a manner that effects flavor and improves tenderness (by breaking down tissue).

But time is money. And so are shrinkage, trim, and handling costs when it comes to dry aging, especially when there is a less expensive way of bringing meat to the marketplace. And there is a less expensive way of bringing meat to the marketplace – in a plastic bag.

You see, about forty years ago the meatpacking industry realized that placing meat in vacuum-sealed bags, soon after slaughtering animals, aged the meat faster, reduced weight loss (from the evaporation of water and need to trim mold), and made it easier to package and transport. Hence, the “wet aging” alternative to the expensive piece of beef that sits behind the glass panel in the Whole Foods store.

During wet aging, the meat is sealed in the plastic and it is not allowed to contact air. It sits in its own blood, and results in “a more intense sour note and more bloody/serummy flavor” according to the Department of Food and Science Nutrition at the University of Minnesota. Dry aged beef, by contrast, is described as “buttery and rich” and “earthy and nutty” and “mellow and intense.”

About ninety percent of the beef we buy today is wet aged, so that’s what we’re used to eating.

Now comes the funny part - academic studies have shown that the American public at large probably prefers beef that has been bagged over beef that has been dry aged (most likely because it’s what we’re used to eating).

Last month, we started a dry aging program at Café Sam. Our own tasting last week left us with an impression that dry aged steaks are absolutely wonderful. Reasonably priced dry aged New York Strip Steaks (\$22.95) finally made it to the new Chef’s Specials menu Friday night, and everyone that ordered them seemed very pleased, too.

The meatpacking industry may not have been doing us any favors when it decided to start vacuum bagging whole strip loins in plastic. While our first instinct might be to prefer the wet aged steaks that we are used to eating, dry aged steaks are definitely worth sampling. Stop in and try a dry aged New York Strip Steak at Café Sam, with an open mind, and you can enjoy making a taste (and tenderness) comparison.