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Be Yourself, Girls, Order the Rib-Eye

By ALLEN SALKIN

MARTHA FLACH mentioned meat twice in her Match.com profile: "I love architecture, The New Yorker, dogs ... steak for two and the Sunday puzzle."

She was seeking, she added, "a smart, funny, kind man who owns a suit (but isn't one) ... and loves red wine and a big steak."

The repetition worked. On her first date with Austin Wilkie, they ate steak frites. A year later, after burgers at the Corner Bistro in Greenwich Village, he proposed. This March, the rehearsal dinner was at Keens Steakhouse on West 36th Street, and the wedding menu included mini-cheeseburgers and more steak.

Ms. Wilkie was a vegetarian in her teens, and even wore a "Meat Is Murder" T-shirt. But by her 30s, she had started eating cow. By the time she placed the personal ad, she had come to realize that ordering steak on a first date had the potential to sate appetites not only of the stomach but of the heart.

Red meat sent a message that she was "unpretentious and down to earth and unneurotic," she said, "that I'm not obsessed with my weight even though I'm thin, and I don't have any food issues." She added, "In terms of the burgers, it said I'm a cheap date, low maintenance."

Salad, it seems, is out. Gusto, medium rare, is in.

Restaurateurs and veterans of the dating scene say that for many women, meat is no longer murder. Instead, meat is strategy. "I've been shocked at the number of women actually ordering steak," said Michael Stillman, vice president of concept development for the Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group, which opened the restaurant Quality Meats in April 2006 on West 58th Street. He said Quality Meats' contemporary design and menu, including extensive seafood offerings, were designed to attract more women than a traditional steakhouse. "But the meat is appealing to them, much more than what I saw two or three years ago at our other restaurants," Mr. Stillman said. "They are going for our bone-in sirloin and our cowboy-cut rib steak."

In an earlier era, conventional dating wisdom for women was to eat something at home alone before a date, and then in company order a light dinner to portray oneself as dainty and ladylike. For some women, that is still the practice. "It's better not to have a jalapeño fajita plate, especially on the first date," said Andrea Bey, 28, who sells video surveillance equipment in Irving, Tex., and describes herself as "curvy." "You don't want to be labeled as 'princess gassy' on the first date."

But others, especially those who are thin, say ordering a salad displays an unappealing mousiness.

"It seems wimpy, insipid, childish," said Michelle Heller, 34, a copy editor at TV Guide. "I don't want to be considered vapid and uninteresting."

Ordering meat, on the other hand, is a declarative statement, something along the lines of “I am woman, hear me chew.”

In fact, red meat on a date has become such an effective statement of self-acceptance that even a vegetarian like Sloane Crosley, a publicist at Random House, sometimes longs to order a burger.

“Being a vegetarian puts you at a disadvantage,” Ms. Crosley said. “You’re in the most basic category of finicky. Even women who order chicken, it isn’t enough.” She said she has thought of ordering shots of Jägermeister, famous for its frat boy associations, to prove that she is “a guy’s girl.”

“Everyone wants to be the girl who drinks the beer and eats the steak and looks like Kate Hudson,” Ms. Crosley, 28, said.

Not all red meat, apparently, is equal in the dating world. The mediums of steak and hamburger each send a different message. Dropping into conversation the fact that steaks of Kobe beef come from Wagyu cattle, but that not all steaks sold as Wagyu are Kobe beef, demonstrates one’s worldliness, said Gabriella Gershenson, a dining editor at Time Out New York. It holds the same currency today that being able to name Hemingway’s four wives held in an earlier era.

Hamburgers, she added, say you are down-to-earth, which is why women rarely order those deluxe hamburgers priced as high as a porterhouse.

“They’re created for men who want to impress women, so they order the \$60 burger, then they let the woman taste it,” Ms. Gershenson said. “The man gets to show off his expertise and show that he can afford it.”

When [Paris Hilton](#) was arrested for driving under the influence, she announced that she had been on her way to In-N-Out Burger, the Southern California chain revered for its gut-busting Double-Double, as if trying to satisfy a craving for two slabs of meat and cheese was an excuse for drunken driving that anyone could understand. And twice last year, Nicole Richie, persistently facing rumors that she suffered from an eating disorder, was photographed biting into burgers in Los Angeles, an effort that seemed designed to demonstrate her casualness toward calories.

Of course, there are always those rare women who order what they want and to heck with what a man might think.

Saehee Hwang, 30, a production director at [Artnet.com](#), found herself out with friends at DuMont restaurant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, when she started feeling attracted to a new guy in the group. She said she had wanted to order a burger, but started having second thoughts. “I didn’t want to appear too much of a carnivore,” she said. “It might be off-putting.”

But then she decided she should not change her order to fit a preconceived idea of what a man might want. She ordered the house specialty, a half-pound of beef on a toasted brioche bun with Gruyère cheese. “We started dating afterward,” Ms. Hwang said. “And he told me he liked the fact that I ordered the burger.”

What about when the tables, so to speak, are reversed? Can a man order a juicy New York strip on the

first date and make a good impression? Gentlemen, be careful. Real men, it seems, must eat kale.

“When a guy sits down and eats something fatty and big, you wonder if they eat like that all the time,” said Brice Gaillard, a freelance design writer. “It crosses my mind they’ll probably die early.”

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