

PUBLISHER & PRESIDENT Steve Fox

### EDITORIAL

EDITOR Andrew Putz  
 MANAGING EDITOR Joel Hoekstra  
 SENIOR EDITOR Dara Moskowitz Grumdahl  
 SENIOR WRITER Tim Gihring  
 STYLE EDITOR Elizabeth Dehn  
 ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR Courtney Lewis  
 CONTRIBUTING EDITORS  
 Sandra Hoyt, Jeff Johnson  
 WRITERS-AT-LARGE Beth Hawkins, Michael Tortorello  
 EDITORIAL INTERNS Brad Tucker, Allison Wickler

### ART

ART DIRECTOR Brian Johnson  
 ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR Kirsten Mortensen

### PRODUCTION

DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION SERVICES Laurie Etchen  
 IT MANAGER Josh Langenfeld  
 PRODUCTION MANAGER Michele Johnson  
 TRAFFIC MANAGER Abbey Jensen  
 SPECIAL SECTION DESIGNERS  
 Mandy Czechowicz, Tabitha Herbranson,  
 Jamie Johnson, Jeremy Nelson, Zach Pate  
 ONLINE EDITOR Kelly Fitzgerald  
 WEB DESIGNER Cassie Potter  
 DIGITAL PRE-PRESS Dan Baker  
 NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR Chris Sang

MARKETING MANAGER Sara McDonald Soli

### SALES & PROMOTION

SALES & MARKETING WRITER/EDITOR Christina Sarinske  
 SENIOR ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVES  
 Kylie Engle, Laurie Ziegler  
 ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVES  
 Dunia Chatham, Amy Koliner,  
 Kim Schroeder, Marta Simpson  
 SALES & MARKETING ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT  
 Alice Strenger  
 MARKETING INTERN Julie Veternick

### BUSINESS

VICE PRESIDENT OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & FINANCE  
 Walter Jungbauer  
 CREDIT MANAGER/ACCOUNTS PAYABLE  
 Anne Leone-Sullivan  
 STAFF ACCOUNTANT Christian Lindman

### CIRCULATION

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR Tim Morgan  
 FULFILLMENT COORDINATOR Tammy Mitchell  
 NEWSSTAND COORDINATOR Patrick Sullivan

### EDITORIAL & BUSINESS OFFICE

600 U.S. Trust Building  
 730 Second Ave. S.  
 Minneapolis, MN 55402  
 612-371-5800 Fax 612-371-5801  
 www.minnesotamonthly.com

**SUBSCRIPTIONS, BACK ISSUES & MEMBERSHIP** A subscription to *Minnesota Monthly* is \$19.95 per year (\$40 international). For subscriptions, call 888-350-0962. Back issues are \$9, pre-paid. For back issues, call 800-933-4398 ext. 5864. Change of address: enclose address label, send to *Minnesota Monthly*, PO Box 580, Mount Morris, IL 61054-0580, and allow 30 days. **MPR members** may choose a subscription as a benefit of membership. Call 800-228-7123, or write to MPR, 480 Cedar St., St. Paul, MN 55101.

**SUBMISSIONS** *Minnesota Monthly* assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or photographs. Unsolicited materials without a self-addressed, stamped envelope will not be returned. Visit our website for guidelines on how to submit.



**Volume 42, Number 4** *Minnesota Monthly* (ISSN 0739-8700) is published monthly by Greenspring Media Group, 730 Second Ave. S., Ste. 600, Mpls., MN 55402, on behalf of Minnesota Public Radio (MPR). MPR sends *Minnesota Monthly* to MPR members who annually contribute \$120 or more to support the programming broadcast by MPR's noncommercial radio stations. Of each membership contribution to MPR, \$14.28 is considered to be the fair market value for a one-year subscription to *Minnesota Monthly*. Periodical postage paid at St. Paul, Minnesota, and additional mailing offices (USPS-443-580). **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *Minnesota Monthly*, PO Box 580, Mount Morris, IL 61054-0580. Printed in the USA. Copyright © Greenspring Media Group 2008. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission.

The pages between the covers of this magazine (except for any inserted material), are printed on paper certified under the **Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI)** program. The SFI program integrates the perpetual growing and harvesting of trees with the protection of wildlife, plants, soils, and water.

# Grass Roots

At the Strip Club, chef J. D. Fratzke has found the secret to cooking exquisite grass-fed steaks

BY DARA MOSKOWITZ GRUMDAHL



**I LIKE EVERYTHING** about grass-fed beef. I like the taste; I find it deeper, wine-ier, more berry-like than traditional corn-fed beef. I like that it contains omega-3 fatty acids, the same good-for-you fats found in ocean fish. I like that grass-fed animals are healthier, because grass is what God and nature designed them to eat, and feedlot diets of corn and soybeans make them sick. I like that grass pastures, unlike traditional tilled fields, don't require "inputs" like synthetic fertilizer, pesticides, and herbicides, most of which wash away and destroy wild things in streams and rivers before heading down the Mississippi to create a big dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

In fact, I'd say the only thing I don't like about grass-fed beef is that every single time a major media outlet covers the topic they call up a bunch of people who serve corn-fed beef and get a lot of quotes along the lines of: "It's trendy, but it'll never fly—it's just too tough!"

Every time I read that story I despair: Is this what it means to be an American today? We spend our mornings reading about downer cows forklifted into school lunches and our nights being such incompetent cooks that we can't prepare a grass-fed steak? Unlike every single backyard cook in Argentina? Unlike every juke-joint fry cook in America before the Korean War? Should we just throw in the towel and declare ourselves unable to do anything more than Google, pour out bowls of breakfast cereal, and complain?

Don't answer that. Happily, heaven heard my cry and supplied the one thing that grass-fed doubters can't get around: A great restaurant specializing in tender, luxurious, tender, elegant, and, yes, tender grass-fed steaks. That restaurant is St. Paul's newest steak house, the Strip Club Meat & Fish. If you've been a grass-fed doubter, or have been watching prices soar at your favorite old steak house because of the ethanol boom, or are simply looking for a good, affordable restaurant in St. Paul, you gotta get in there.

But first you have to find it. It's tucked up near Metropolitan State University, just off that odd left-exit that zips up the bluffs from eastbound I-94. The building is a timeless, old, St. Paul rivertown-era brick storefront, the kind built on high ground with big glass windows, the kind that you find up and down the Mississippi, in places like Winona and Alma, Wisconsin.

The first thing that strikes you about the Strip Club is its risqué name (be prepared to explain at length to your baby-sitter). Many will be dismayed to find that theme carried onto the menu: You can add "XXX-cargot" butter to your steak. (Don't.) However, look past the puns and you'll find some perfectly serious cooking.

That cooking is done by up-and-coming chef J. D. Fratzke, recently of Muffuletta, who founded the Strip Club along with his longtime friend and Town Talk principal, Tim Niver, and some investors. There was a certain outdoorsy, ducks-and-sausages edge to Fratzke's cooking when he led the team at Muffuletta, but now, in his own restaurant, his personal vision shines through unadulterated: I'd call it an exceptionally refined version of Men Celebrating the Hunt. His duck confit, for instance, is exquisite. It's a full quarter of a duck, which Fratzke salt-packs with cinnamon, cloves, and allspice. He lets it sit, then rinses and simmers the meat in fat until it's as tender as pudding, then puts it in the oven until the skin is as crisp as a potato chip. The duck quarter is served with a pile of red grapes that have been grilled and roasted, and a frisée salad dressed with juice from some of those caramelized grapes. The overall effect is nothing short of electrifying. The meat is tender, rich, crisp, and subtle, while the grapes and frisée work to reset the palate and refocus the attention on the sensuality of the dish. It's lush, it's new. It's lush, it's new. Marvelous. For the caesar salad, Fratzke chars a head of romaine till it softens, dresses it boldly and adds plenty of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese. It's so powerful, it's a steak of a salad.

» Old St. Paul was all brick and iron, as is the Strip Club; opposite, grass-fed Swedish meatballs with mashed potatoes.

Photographs by TERRY BRENNAN



I found some of Fratzke's work on the fussier side of the menu less accomplished: Mussels disappeared beneath the chunks of sausage and leek accompanying them, and the shrimp Scampi was cooking-school-perfect, but nothing special.

It's the steaks, though, where Fratzke does the work that will make his reputation. The \$16 beef-ball tip steak, for instance, is what's known as a "butcher's cut," or, less politely, a second-rate cut. But there's nothing second rate about it—it's phenomenal. It arrives before you already sliced to reveal the cabernet-veiled interior ringed by a black-edged, well grilled exterior. Each bite is a thunder of big beefy flavor unfurling subtle nuances of berry, new hay, pepper,

and warmth. The sage-scented cannellini beans accompanying the steak enhance its wonder, bringing out the herbal, meadow notes that make local grass-fed beef so spectacular. (All of the Strip Club's beef is grass-fed and comes from the local Thousand Hills Cattle Company.) The restaurant's showpiece, the New York strip, is similarly spectacular. It tastes big and wild, like a spring thunderstorm booming through the Mississippi bluffs, but also subtle and tender—what dinner should be when you get the big promotion or toast the big anniversary.

How does he do it? Fratzke says his grass-fed-beef secrets are all about heat management. He first gives every steak

a hard sear, then finishes it, according to the guests' order, at much lower temperatures. Of course, this is how corn-fed beef is cooked at the big, conventional steak houses. Is the secret of cooking grass-fed steaks merely the will to do it well?

Fratzke certainly has that drive. "I grew up in Winona," Fratzke says. "My great-grandparents came over from northern Germany 130 years ago and settled in the hills, but we gradually moved down into the city. And what is Winona but an island in the Mississippi? I grew up spending 100, 200 days a year either ice-fishing with my dad, goose or duck hunting, or just messing around. I still call it my river. When you're little you admire your dad so much, and with the hunting, the fishing, he tagged an ethic on what we were doing: You take care of the land, you respect the creatures on it, you don't hurt it.... Industrial beef hurts farmers, it hurts the land, it hurts my river. I don't want to look out the window and think: *I'm part of that*. I know a lot of the farms these cattle come from," he says. Thousand Hills cattle come from some 40 farmers and ranchers near Cannon Falls. "I know what pastures and hills they live on, I know what creeks they drink from," Fratzke continues. "I feel like the best thing I can do is cook the best I can from the ethic I learned messing around on the Mississippi, and hope."

The best Fratzke can do is very welcome indeed, not just because the steaks at the Strip Club are delicious, but because the restaurant provides a template for what a grass-fed, family farm supporting, land-sustaining, Minnesota-enhancing steak house can be. **MM**

**Dara Moskowitz Grumdahl** is a senior editor at *Minnesota Monthly*.

**The Strip Club Meat & Fish**  
 378 Maria Ave., St. Paul  
 651-793-6247

**Open** for lunch Tues.-Fri.; dinner Tues.-Sat.; brunch weekends.

**Reservations** recommended for dinner.

**Parking** on street or in Metropolitan State University lot across Sixth Street.

**Prices** for appetizers range from \$3-\$15, entrées \$9-\$28.