

EAT OUT

Serving up the city's best restaurants, bars and culinary riches

You're dressed head to toe in gray. You've just picked up Tom Wolfe's new novel (though you'll get around to reading it later). And you finally signed up for that yoga class. But what are you—the up-to-the-minute New Yorker—eating this winter? How do beef cheeks sound?

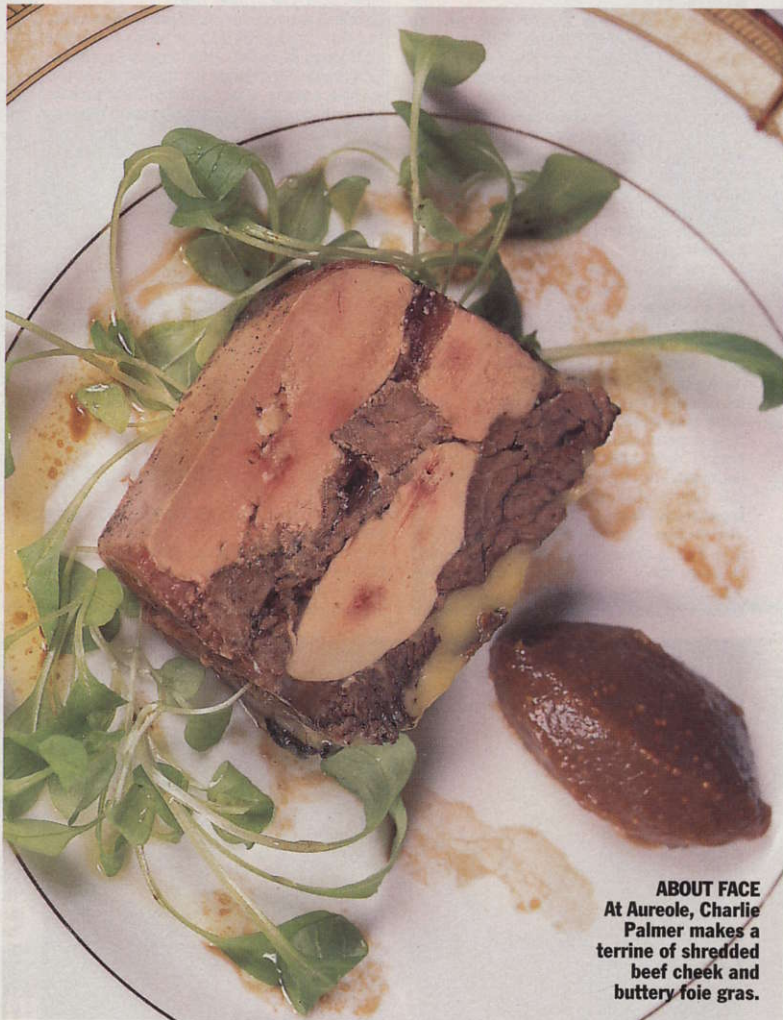
A bit scary, perhaps. But if Manhattan's most promising chefs have their say, you will be familiar with them soon. Beef cheeks (literally the cheek muscle of a cow) are making the scene more often than Leonardo DiCaprio: They're on the menu at Babbo, Gramercy Tavern and Alison on Dominick—and that's just below 23rd Street.

Mario Batali says he goes through 40 pounds of cheek a week at Babbo, where he prepares beef-cheek ravioli with crushed squab livers and black truffles. Although the dish has earned Batali a fair amount of press, he admits that the jowls aren't an easy sell. "When people first see the dish," says Batali with a laugh, "they're like, 'What the hell are beef cheeks, and why did he have to crush those squabs!?!' But once they get by the verbiage, they love them."

It's easy to understand why. As chef Dan Silverman of Alison on Dominick says, beef cheeks are the "moistest, most tender, most flavorful piece of beef you can hope to eat."

Broad flaps of meat weighing more than a pound and measuring between six and ten inches long, the cheeks are tough, gnarled-looking cuts layered with seams of collagen and sinew. But when beef cheeks—much like pork shoulder and other rugged cuts—are braised for several hours, the connective tissue breaks down and a lush, incredibly rich flavor emerges. Imagine the most sublime pot roast or brisket your mom could ever make.

It's not *too* surprising that beef cheeks have suddenly become fashionable. New York chefs



ABOUT FACE
At Aureole, Charlie Palmer makes a terrine of shredded beef cheek and buttery foie gras.

TRÈS CHEEK

Long loved by chefs, a curious cut of beef comes into vogue By **Adam Rapoport** Photograph by **Maria Quiroga**

are constantly racing to be the first to popularize underused ingredients. Three years ago, hanger steak—a beefy, chewy French cut, known as *onglet* in France—knocked sirloin steak down a notch on menus throughout the city. A few years before that, chef Tom Valenti, then at Cascabel, helped make lamb shanks the osso buco of the early '90s.

In Italy, the cow's cheeks—and the rest of the head—are an integral part of *bollito misto*, a mixed plate of boiled meats served with a variety of sauces and vegetables. Daniel Boulud,

chef/owner of Daniel and Café Boulud, recalls eating beef cheeks as a kid growing up on a farm near Lyons. "That was the cut that chefs and butchers would always save for themselves," says Boulud.

Charlie Palmer gives cheeks an upscale French treatment in a terrine he makes at Aureole. He alternates layers of buttery foie gras with shredded beef cheek; slices of the terrine are paired with fig compote, wild greens and pistachios. Palmer served the dish at his restaurant's tenth anniversary party two months ago and at a recent \$750-a-plate benefit dinner in Las Vegas. He even makes beef cheeks at home, stewing big pots of them for his two young sons. "They love them," says Palmer, "although they're too young to really know what they're eating."

As much as chefs praise the flavor of beef cheeks (not to mention other cheeks—Palmer frequently serves halibut and cod cheeks as specials at Aureole), they also enjoy the profit margin the cut provides. Pat LaFrieda Wholesale Meat Company on Washington Street, which supplies cheeks to Batali, Silverman and Christian Delouvrier of Lespinasse, charges about \$1.50 a pound (compared with, say, \$8.50 a pound for filet of beef).

At the ultraelegant Lespinasse, Delouvrier uses the cheap cut to make *parmentier de fondant de boeuf*—a sort of French shepherd's pie. He marinates the cheeks for seven days in red wine, herbs and vegetables, braises them for four hours, then places the shredded meat in a circular mold and tops it with black-truffle mashed potatoes. The price tag? \$34. Expensive, yes. But then, style has never come cheap in this town.

Beef cheeks are available at Pat LaFrieda Wholesale Meat Company, 601 Washington St at Leroy St (929-2420).