EATER City NEW YORK

EATER GUIDES

A Guide to Navigating the Steakhouses of New York City

Friday, February 28, 2014, by Nick Solares

[Delmonico's. All Photos by Nick Solares unless otherwise noted.]

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EATER GUIDES
GALLAGHERS
HAS MAP
KEENS
PETER LUGER
SMITH & WOLLENSKY
TOP
1 COMMENT
Save

Steakhouses are not like other restaurants and New York City steakhouses are not like other steakhouses. Over the last century and a half, New York City steakhouses have developed their own rules and customs that are distinct from other types of restaurants. They can be intimidating to the novice and baffling to even the most seasoned restaurant diner. With that in mind, here's a guide to navigating New York City steakhouses, with everything you need to know to get the most out of your experience:

History

The first steakhouse in the United States was **Delmonico's** (1827). It is considered a steakhouse because of the prevalence of beefsteaks on the menu and because it is credited with creating the Delmonico cut. But it was really more of a fine dining restaurant. Both Lobster Newburg and Baked Alaska originated there, and **Charles Ranhofer**, who became chef de cuisine in 1862, was arguably America's first celebrity chef. Delmonico's is still around today (although it has not seen continuous service having closed for a few years), but it represents a parallel evolutionary branch of the steakhouse genre. The menu at Delmonico's was traditionally heavily French in influence, and the dining room, then and now, ornate and filled with plush furniture.

[Keens]

The more common steakhouse aesthetic is much simpler and to the point, springing not from the hospitality industry but from the beefsteak socials of the 19th century. Beefsteaks were banquet dinners with steak and beer as the organizing principle. These large fraternal gatherings would last for hours on end and the men (women were not welcome) would consume alarming amounts of beef and beer, and nothing else. While this type of dining waned in popularity by the 20th century, it helped spawn the steakhouse as a restaurant. This heritage is one of the reasons why many steakhouses look like banquet halls — dusty, baroque rooms with wood paneling and vaguely Gothic accents. It also adds an element of ritualization to steakhouse dining.

Peter Luger, founded in 1887, is the prototypical NYC steakhouse. Others may have been around longer — **Keens** dates back to 1885 and the **Old Homestead** all the way back to 1868 — but none have enjoyed the influence or the popular acclaim of Luger. It has inspired a legion of imitators and firmly established the porterhouse steak for two, served sliced and swimming in butter on a sizzling platter, as the quintessential NYC steakhouse steak. Peter Luger is a good starting point for any serious exploration of the NYC steakhouse genre.

Of course the steakhouse evolved, especially in Manhattan where the 20th century saw the rise of such notable and surviving steakhouses as **The Palm** (1926), **Gallagher's** (1927), **The Bull & Bear** (1960), and **Sparks** (1966). By the mid century, "Steak Row," which centered around 45th Street, became the epicenter of steak in Manhattan with steakhouses such as **Pen & Pencil, Joe & Rose's, The Pressbox** and **Danny's Hideaway**. All have now shuttered, but the area still has plenty of steakhouses with two locations of The Palm and Sparks in close proximity.

[Smith & Wollensky]

Smith & Wollensky opened in 1977 on the corner of Third Avenue and 49th Street, but the location had previously housed **Manny Wolf's**, which dated back to 1896. While Smith & Wollesnky has become a national chain, the original location has always remained independently operated. Employees of Smith & Wollensky have gone on to found their own steakhouses such as **Ben Benson**.

Prime, Corn Fed Beef

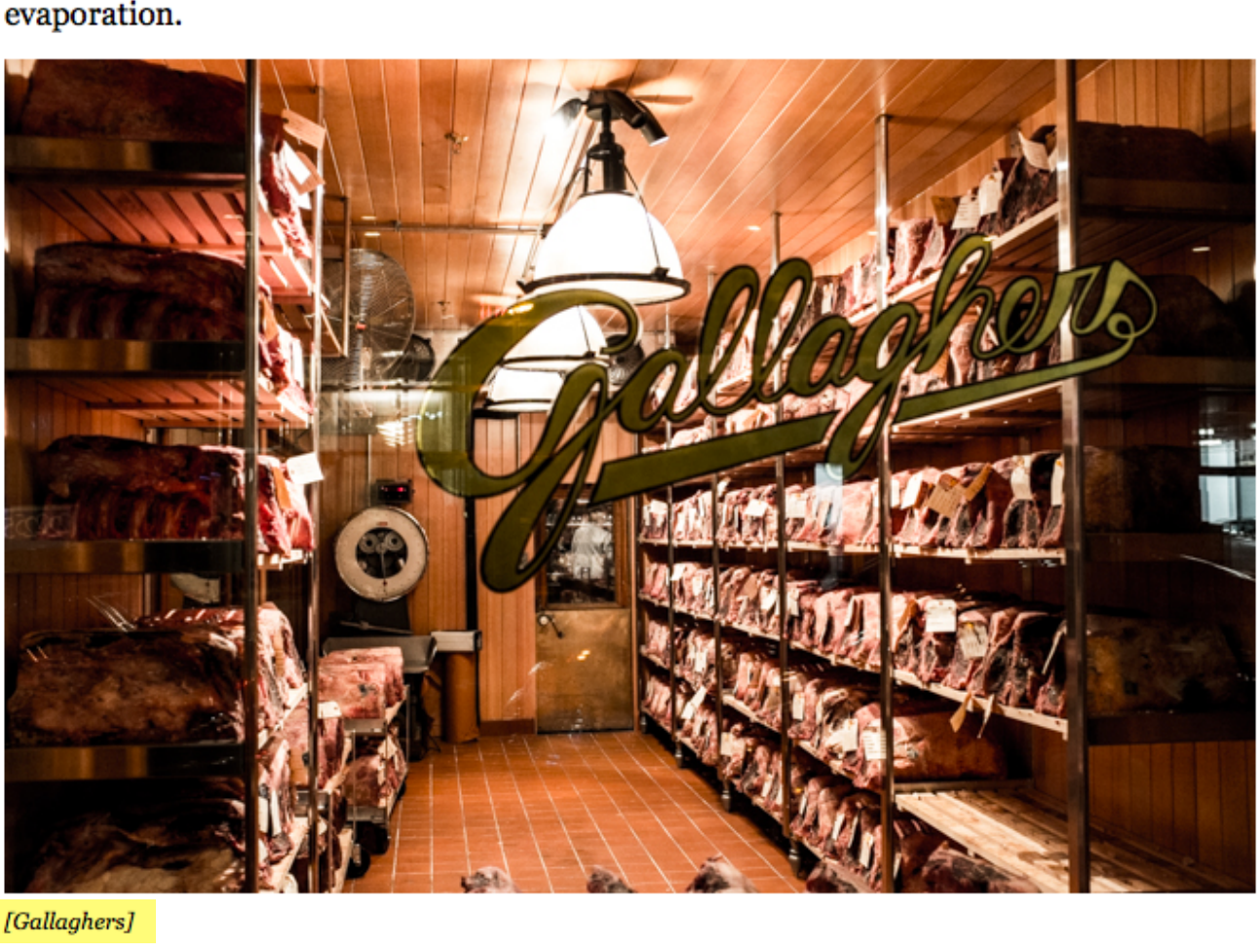
The beef served at a true NYC steakhouse is grain finished USDA Prime. This grade of beef comes from the steer, which is the male of the species and has the necessary musculature to produce high quality steaks. Cows, the female of the species, are reserved for dairy production and low grade meat such as commodity hamburger. Prime beef accounts for between two and four percent of all graded beef in the US, making it very expensive. It isn't just the quality of the beef that sets NYC steakhouses apart, it is what they do with it once they get it.

Dry Aging

[Dry aged beef]

The first thing you will notice upon entering Peter Luger is the unmistakably musky aroma of dry aged beef, which wafts up invitingly from the meat locker in the restaurant's cavernous basement. Dry aged prime beef is the hallmark of the NYC steakhouse experience. While most of the world long ago adopted so called "wet aging" — storing beef in plastic bags to tenderize it — true NYC steakhouses do it the old fashioned way, by storing it uncovered in specially constructed rooms, and allowing it to become desiccated and for a controlled mold to form. This causes it to become tender through enzymic process and develop complex flavors, akin to the way that wine and cheese are produced.

Dry aged beef has pronounced mineral rich notes. It is often described as "earthy," "nutty," "steely," and "funky." As it approaches a month in the dry age room, it takes on a flavor similar to blue cheese and loses a significant amount of weight due to moisture evaporation.



[Gallaghers]

Be wary of restaurant menus that refer to the beef as "aged." Technically, all beef is aged, so you should ask them to clarify whether it is dry or wet aged. Dry aging is a point of pride for many restaurants. The recently revamped Gallaghers is famous for the meat locker that is on display in the front of the restaurant and is visible from the street. It reveals row upon row of short loins and ribs aging majestically. Gallaghers is the exception however — most dry age rooms are sequestered in the basement and their secrets are closely guarded.

Because of the loss of weight associated with dry aging beef, expect to pay significantly more for such steaks. In a New York City steakhouse, dry aged steaks typically range in price from $45 to $65 for steaks for one such as strip loin, rib steak, or T-bone. These steaks generally weigh between 16 and 30 ounces. Porterhouses, which are always served for two, cost around $100 for a 45 to 50 ounce steak.

> **Despite the high prices, it is important to note that steakhouses don't actually make a profit on selling the steak itself.**

Despite the high prices, it is important to note that steakhouses don't actually make a profit on selling the steak itself. **Tommy Hart**, former general manager and managing partner of Smith & Wolesnky, who has spent almost four decades in the business, explains: "On average, restaurants need to operate on a 30 percent food cost basis. Steakhouses pay around 45 to 55 percent food cost for their beef." Because of this, they need to up-sell you on the sides, appetizers, and most importantly, the wine. Of course, at their most successful, steakhouses can be hugely profitable. Sparks, for example, pulled in **$23 million** last year, putting it on *Forbe's* list of Top Grossing Restaurants in America.

So now that you know the origins of the genre, the type of beef these restaurants sell, and how they make their money, it's time to visit a steakhouse.

The Dress Code

While there is an implied "business casual" requirement at most of the Manhattan steakhouses, you will see some rather lax examples of that. Considering the cost of steakhouse dining, it's wholly appropriate for gentlemen to wear jackets and ties, as this makes the experience more pleasant for the other diners in the room.

The Gatekeeper

While most restaurants that charge as much as steakhouses do go out of their way to be hospitable, it is sometimes hard not to feel as the steak did before it was steak at the front desk of a New York City steakhouse. The way that a maître d' manages the waiting area at a steakhouse might seem to be total chaos, but it is actually a carefully orchestrated procedure designed to turn over the dining room tables as quickly as possible. At the same time, the restaurant needs to make sure that regulars are looked after.

Ryan Yeisley worked the front door at Smith & Wollensky for over a decade and tells an amusing anecdote about former **Mayor Michael Bloomberg** that is illustrative of the way things work at a steakhouse. Yeisley was at **JG Melon**, the popular Upper East Side bar, on his day off waiting for a table. Mayor Bloomberg arrived and was whisked to one immediately. Yeisley quipped about having to wait while "Hizzoner" was given preferential treatment. The mayor heard him and retorted, "You never make me wait at Smith & Wollensky either!"

The mayor was right, of course — like any restaurant, there are always VIPs. But Yeisley is diplomatic about how a regular or VIP is treated versus a first time customer. He explains: "We try to make them both happy, of course, but it is easier to do that when you know the clients' tastes and preferences." When asked about the practice of bribing the maître d' for a table or tipping them at the end, Yeisley confirms that the practice does happen and that palming off $20 or $40 is certainly appreciated, but that it is not at all necessary. In fact, the best tip he offers is a simple one: "Just be nice."

The Waiter

If you are lucky, you will get an old-school waiter. Invariably gruff and often cantankerous, they will hurl insults and plates of food at you with an assumed familiarity that will make you feel welcome. Don't take offense at the schtick — it is part of the experience. But at the same time, don't feel pressure to order based on their suggestions as they are often trying to up-sell you. That seemingly off the cuff "seafood towers are popular" remark will add $120 to your check. Waiters with experience understand that cynical up-selling won't help generate repeat customers.

[A waiter at Peter Luger.]

In many cases, the waiters are more famous than the chefs at steakhouses. **Wolfgang Zwiener**, for example, waited tables at Peter Luger for four decades, attaining a cult following. He eventually opening his own successful chain of steakhouses called **Wolfgang's**, patterned on the Luger model. Similarly, **Ben & Jack's** was started by two brothers, **Jack** and **Russ Sinanaj**, who also worked at Luger and now operate two Manhattan locations.

How to Order

Wine

Steakhouses make most of their profits from wine and liquor sales. And thus they often invest heavily and have deep cellars stocked with rare and expensive wines. The beef, it turns out, is just a ruse to get you into the restaurant to spend money on grapes. An average steakhouse menu can fit onto a single page, whereas the corresponding wine list can be as thick as a dictionary.

But don't fall into what Eater wine editor **Levi Dalton** refers to as the "$80 to $120 trap." There are few bargains in this range because it is the most popular price point. Dalton advises going either above or below that range. Don't be afraid of the cheapest wine on the list. At the same time, a steak dinner is supposed to be an extraordinary meal, so splurging on a decent bottle of wine to go with your steak is something that you should embrace. Once you crest that $120 hump you will see much better value for money, even though you will be spending more.

Dalton further advises you to think outside the box by avoiding the most obvious grapes like Cabernet, which tend to be the most popular in steakhouses, and also look to less obvious regions than France and California and instead to a place like Italy where "outside of Amarone and possibly Brunello" most people would not think to look. Another option Dalton suggests is to skip the wine altogether and just "go right to the hard stuff."

[Photo: A bottle of Opus One at Smith & Wollensky]

Appetizers

You will generally get seafood of a higher quality in a steakhouse than you will steak in a seafood restaurant. Shrimp cocktails are on almost every steakhouse menu, and Manhattan steakhouses in particular tend to offer large seafood bouquets that tower skyward and have the same effect on your check. The wedge salad — iceberg lettuce served with blue cheese dressing — is probably the most iconic appetizer, although Luger does not offer it. The famed Williamsburg steakhouse does, however, offer large slices of onion and tomatoes (year round) along with its famous "steakhouse" sauce (note that it is not called steak sauce). Oysters and slab bacon are also quite popular around town but a word of caution about the bacon: While the thick, charred bacon served at steakhouses certainly look impressive in comparison to what you might see in your local diner, it is generally the exact same product. This is the same commodity pork you can find in your supermarket.

A good piece of advice is to skip the appetizers at steakhouses, as they only serve to pad the bill and your stomach. It is not that they are never good — they often are — but you are here to eat steak and since they tend to weigh in at a pound or more, you should save your appetite for the beef and your money for a better bottle of wine.

The Steak

The dry aged steaks served in NYC steakhouses are cut from the rib and short loin "primals." These are the highest quality and most tender cuts on the steer. The steaks are generally broiled in large gas powered broilers that are adept at searing the meat. There are some exceptions — Gallaghers grills over charcoal — but gas powered broilers are the most common.

[A porterhouse steak at Peter Luger.]

The short loin gives us the porterhouse, T-bone, strip loin, and tenderloin steaks. The porterhouse, which contains portions of the strip loin and tenderloin as well as the iconic "T" shaped bone, is always sold for two because it would otherwise be vanishingly thin. Because of the size of the steak, it is common practice to serve the porterhouse sliced. Steaks for one are generally served whole. Peter Luger popularized serving steak on a sizzling platter, and dousing them in a combination of rendered fat and butter, called "shine" or love."

When given a choice, many steak connoisseurs opt for the porterhouse cut closest to the rib of the short loin, which is where the T-bone begins. This is because the other end contains a portion of the gluteus medious muscle from the sirloin, which is not as tender and is separated by a "vein" that can be tough to chew. Because of this, the end cut porterhouse or strip loin is sometimes referred to as the "sucker" steak.

The T-bone is less common because a strip loin only yields one or two cuts. It is similar to the porterhouse because it shares both portions of the strip loin and tenderloin but only a small portion of the latter. The fillet on a porterhouse is round, while on a T-bone it is triangular in shape.

The strip loin or NY strip steak is commonly sold for one, both with or without a bone. The bone-in steaks have more flavor as a result of direct exposure to the dry age room. You will sometimes see strip loins listed as a "sirloin" steaks, shell steaks, or Kansas City strip steaks on menus.

The tenderloin, often called the filet mignon, is the most tender cut on the steer. But because it does not have significant marbling — intramuscular fat, the fat within the muscle itself — it does not have a lot of flavor. While it is extremely popular, especially in the tourist heavy-Midtown steakhouses, the other steaks mentioned above are far more flavorful.

[A steakhouse broiler.]

Executive chef **Joseph Paulino** of **Uncle Jack's**, which has a two Manhattan locations and a third in Queens, reports that at the Midtown restaurant, which has a lot of tourist traffic, tenderloins account for over half of sales, whereas at the other locations the rib steak and porterhouse are the most popular.

Something else to note: Unless it is attached to a bone (as in a porterhouse or T-bone), tenderloin is never dry aged, further stripping it of potential flavor. You may also occasionally see Chateaubriand on old school menus — this is a tenderloin for two and, again, it is not commonly dry aged.

The rib section yields the rib steak and the boneless variant the ribeye, also called the Delmonico cut. According to Delmonico's current executive chef **Billy Oliva**, the Delmonico's cut at the restaurant was historically the best steak available on a given night, so it might have been a variety of cuts. Indeed, throughout different regions of America, Delmonico may refer to either a top sirloin, strip loin, or a ribeye. But in NYC, and at Delmonico's itself, a Delmonico steak is always a ribeye.

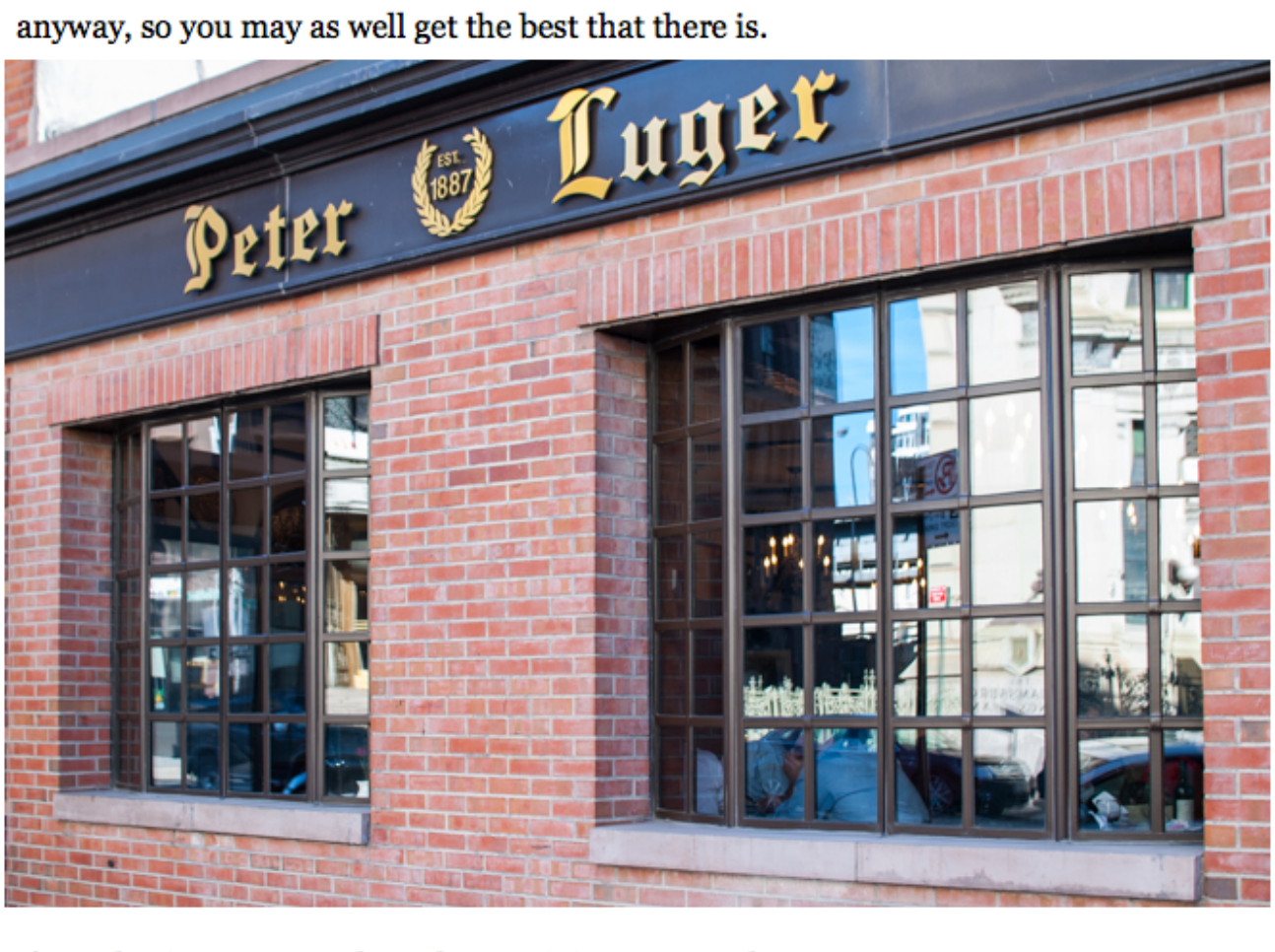
While the rib steak and ribeye steak are not quite as popular on menus as short loin steaks, they are considered the steak of choice amongst serious steak eaters. This is because of the *spinalis dorsi* muscle, or cap, that surrounds the *longissimus* muscle, commonly referred to as the "eye." The *spinalis* is especially flavorful and fibrous, and because it lies on the exterior of the chop, it is redolent with the flavor of dry aging. If you like the cap, consider asking for steaks cut from the anterior or "chuck end " of the rib. Note that rib steaks cut from the loin end of the rib section will have almost no *spinals*, as the muscle has tapered off completely, and they are quite similar to strip loin steaks. While it is not immediately obvious because the muscle changes shape, the *longissimus* muscle is the center of the ribeye and the strip loin.

> **The rib steak and ribeye have gained increasing popularity in recent years in the steakhouses of NYC.**

The rib steak and ribeye have gained increasing popularity in recent years in the steakhouses of NYC. **Shane Finnegan**, who has waited tables at Gallaghers steakhouse since 1995, reports that the cut "has become as popular as the filet and porterhouse," accounting for a third of sales in recent years.

The rib is often roasted whole to make prime rib, a dish whose popularity has waned in recent decades but can be found on many steakhouse menus, including Smith & Wollensky, Gallaghers, The Palm, **Empire Steakhouse**, and Keens. If your only experience with prime rib is the grey abomination found at weddings, you should consider ordering it in a proper steakhouse.

You will also occasionally see cheaper cuts of beef such as hanger, skirt, or steaks cut from the true sirloin (as opposed to the strip loin), often at lunch. These will be more economical but not nearly as tender or flavorful. To choose such lesser cuts is to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory — you are going to be spending a substantial sum anyway, so you may as well get the best that there is.



After selecting your cut the only remaining concern becomes temperature.

Medium rare, which is a 130° internal temperature, is the most requested order and the one that most chefs will recommend. It offers the best flavor experience, because the fat has reached its melting point. There is, of course, an undeniable mystique associated with ordering steak rare (120°) or even "black and blue" (also know as "Pittsburgh style" or "bleu"), which is an even cooler internal temperature and a charred exterior. This is often reinforced by the old school waiters who will nod approvingly if you correct them when they ask, "Medium rare?" by opting for rare instead. Order your steak back and blue and they will slap you on the back and commend you verbally.

But don't feel like you need to please the waiter, or that you will gain macho credibility by ordering a steak rarer than you prefer to eat it. You are paying through the nose, so your mouth may as well get the most out of it.

If you order steak at medium (160°) or beyond, it will have lost significant amounts of juice. You may as well save your money and order a cheaper protein. Order a well done tenderloin in a steakhouses and you will end up with the raggedy end cut that will be butterflied lest it ignite during cooking. Steakhouse broilers run hot and are designed to cook steak efficiently to medium rare — anything beyond that and you are asking for a lump of charcoal. And don't be afraid to send back a steak that is not the way you ordered it, just be polite about it.

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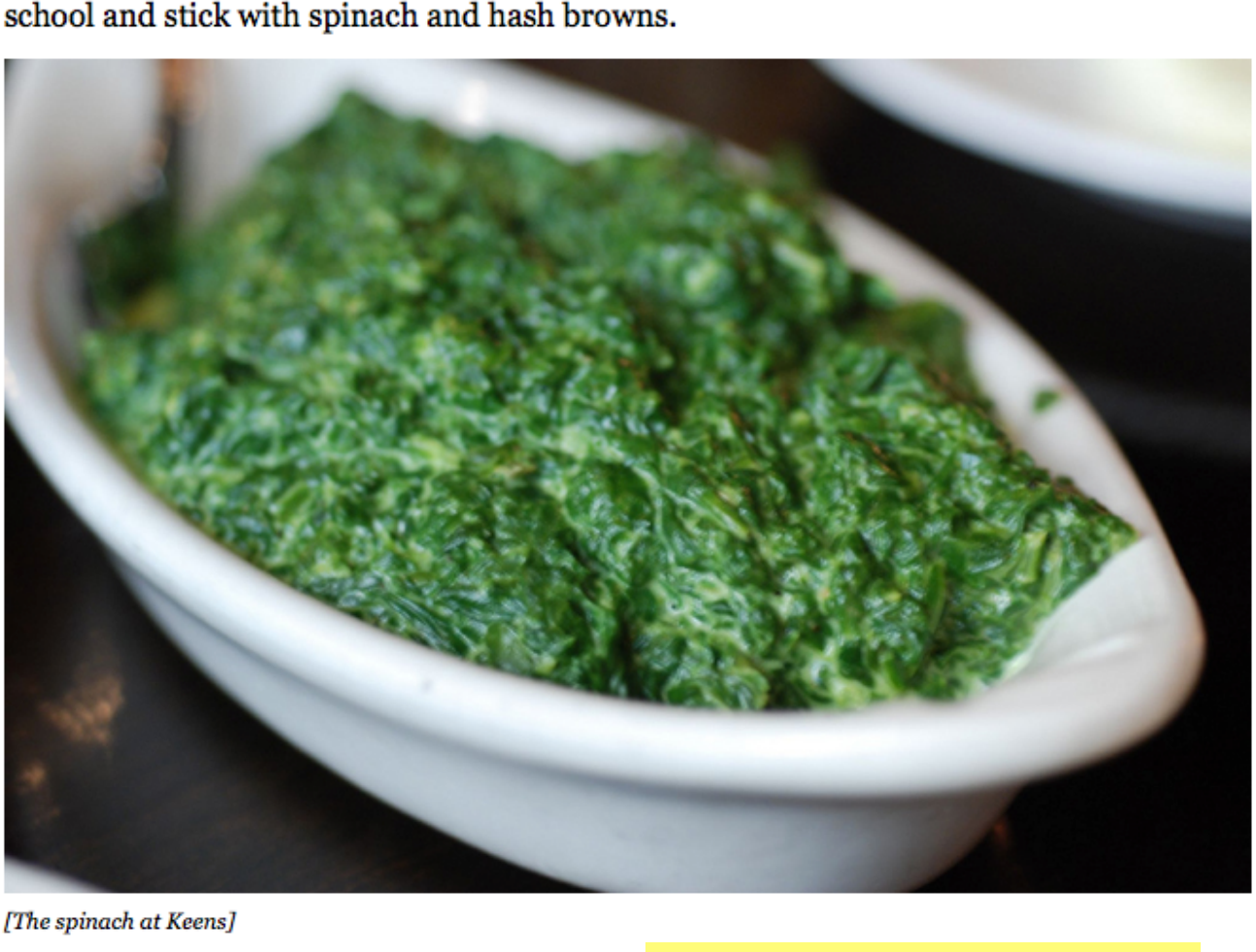
Sides

The practice of serving steaks a la carte dates back to the beefsteaks. Potatoes and vegetables were added almost as an afterthought when the beefsteak morphed into the steakhouse. As a consequence, they tend to be rather unimaginative. Creamed spinach and hash brown potatoes are the most common sides, and many places sold nothing else for decades. These days the canon has been broadened — asparagus, mac and cheese, French fries, and Brussels sprouts are all popular. But first timers should go old school and stick with spinach and hash browns.



[The spinach at Keens]

The portion sizes of sides at steakhouses vary. At Gallaghers, **Shane Finnegan** will often advise dinners to split sides at the table. When you see the size of the creamed spinach and hash browns served at Gallaghers, you will appreciate his advice. By comparison, an order of the similarly priced hash browns at Keens, while delicious, will barely feed one.

Dessert

[Schlag from Peter Luger]

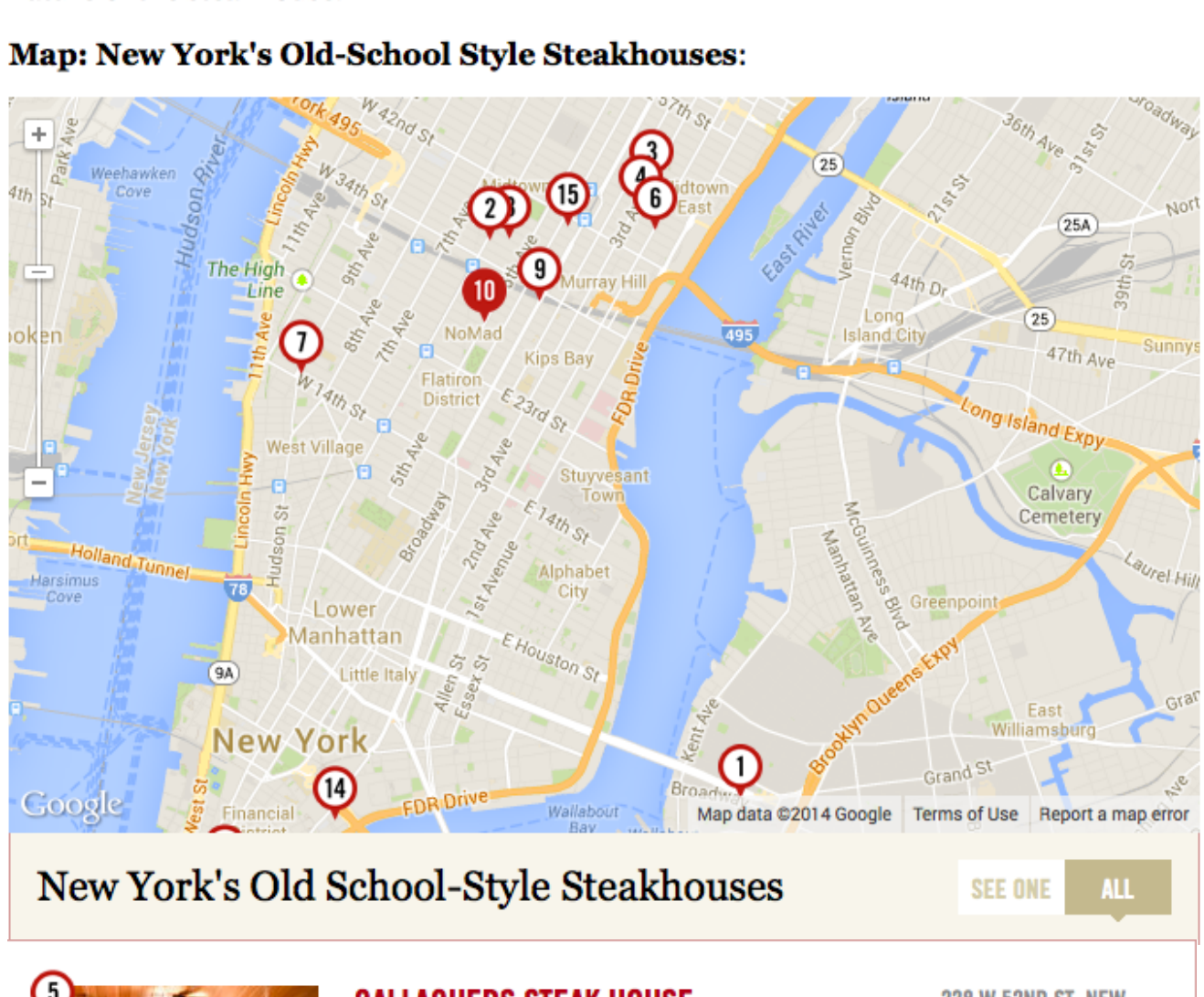
Cheesecake is the quintessential NYC steakhouse dessert. Peter Luger is also known for its schlag — a thick, sweetened whipped cream — that is either dolloped on top of a piece of cheesecake or ordered by the bowlful. There are other standouts: The toffee sundae at Keens is legendary, and the coconut cake at Smith & Wollensky (the first steakhouse to employ a full time pastry chef) has inspired many imitators. However, most steakhouse desserts are fairly pedestrian — expect a lot of powered sugar, chocolate sauce, and sprigs of mint. Again, they all pad your bill. Expect to pay an average of $10 per dessert.

Coffee is usually pretty dreadful in steakhouses. But that might be true of restaurants in general. On the other hand, the after dinner drinks can be quite interesting, but watch the prices — that port the waiter casually offers you could add $40 to your check.

The Check

Doubling the tax for the tip is standard, although 20 percent or even more is quite common according to Hart (and very much appreciated). Waiters, especially in the more tourist heavy areas, are not shy about informing patrons they suspect are foreign that "service is NOT included." You should let your conscience guide you here. And tipping the maître d' on the way out will likely help you on the way in the next time. Regulars will of course develop personal relationships with the staff and it is not uncommon for them to actually request service by a specific waiter. Thus is the clubby nature of the steakhouse.

Map: New York's Old-School Style Steakhouses:



New York's Old School-Style Steakhouses

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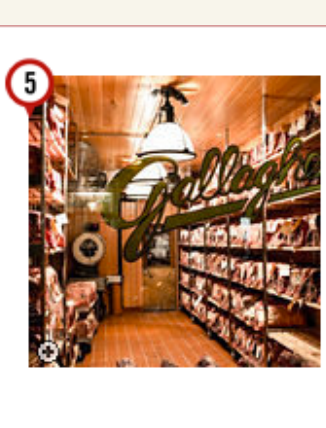

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