

Gourmet meat for the pit

Barbecues go upmarket as people splash out on premium meat and seafood for their gatherings

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Forget chicken wings, crab sticks and otak, gourmet meats are adding thrill to the grill. Butcheries and barbecue food suppliers are upping their game by providing adventurous marinades such as peri peri and including accompaniments such as cheese and fruit platters in their barbecue packages.

At least eight butcheries and barbecue suppliers are offering hassle-free barbecue packs that come with a diverse range of steaks, sausages, cutlets, burger patties and kebabs.

Most of these businesses have seen a 20 to 30 per cent increase in sales of grill-friendly meats and barbecue packages in the past year. Orders usually spike on weekends, the eve of public holidays or during the school holiday months of June and December. These are when barbecues are the focal points for get-togethers with family and friends.

While expatriates form the bulk of the customers, a growing number of Singaporeans are turning to gourmet meats for their barbecues.

Mr Ronald Ang, 75, managing director of Meat The Butcher in Bukit Timah Road, believes that more young adults are embracing barbecue culture from countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom.

He says: "They acquired a Western palate when they studied and worked overseas and want the same kinds of meats when they return home." His business has increased threefold since it started in 2008, with up to 120 customers in a day.

Also pushing up demand is the fact that there are more condominiums with barbecuing facilities.

Mr Ken Yeo, 42, owner of 15-year-old Ridgewood Gourmet in Ridgewood Close, says: "Barbecue pits are more easily available. There isn't a need to rent a public pit in East Coast Park."

Mr Lee Kok Lam, 43, general manager of The Butcher, which has shops in River Valley and Holland Village, has seen sales increase by about 20 per cent in the past year. He gets close to 2,000 customers a week.

He says: "They want to achieve the flavour of meats served in restaurants in their homes and want to show off their newly acquired grilling techniques picked up from our expatriate butchers."

Over the years, The Butcher's Dog in Great World City has increased its variety of meats by 30 per cent to include items such as venison flank steak and veal steak, and added grain- and grass-fed meats to the inventory.

Barbecue foods supplier Hungry BBQ also enhanced the quality of meats in its premium packages by replacing grain-fed Australian striploin with grass-fed

The company sells at least 300 premium packages, which comprise more than 10 types of marinated meats and seafood, every month.

Mr Keith Lam, 33, a director at Hungry BBQ, says: "Most Singaporeans do not barbecue every day so they do not mind paying more for quality and uncommon ingredients, and the convenience of having the ingredients delivered to their doorstep."

He adds that most customers order a premium package on top of the regular packages to inject more variety into their party menus.

These days, importing premium meats does not cut it – some customers want ethically raised meats from traceable sources too.

Ms Sasha Conlan, 44, owner of The Barbie Girls, an online meat and seafood grocer, says: "Customers are more discerning and educated on the ill effects of mass produced foods and want to find out about the background of their food to ensure nothing nasty, such as growth hormones or preservatives, is added."

"Though people are eating less meat, they want higher quality meat."

She travels to farms in Australia and New Zealand four times a year to check on the breeding processes of the animals.

Joining the fray is organic meat package delivery service Stoke, which was launched last month. The owners, Mr Chris Vethaviasar, 40, and Ms Ruth See, 36, have raised more than 40 per cent of their target funding of about \$20,000 via crowd-funding website Kickstarter.

They are so confident of the "farm-to-grill concept" that they will go ahead with the business even if they do not meet the target funding. Through farm stays over the past two years, they have seen the farming processes of their would-be suppliers and intend to import acorn-fed Iberico pork from Spain and saltbush-grazing Bultarra lamb from Australia.

Mr Vethaviasar says: "We don't get much organically grown meats in a commercialised place such as Singapore and we are missing out on minerals and more tender meat textures. We want to let the meats speak for themselves."

While barbecue fans are mindful of the premium price tag, they say barbecuing gourmet meats is an exciting switch.

Ms Irene Santoso, 40, an art director in a digital advertising firm, who throws an annual barbecue party, says: "Barbecues have always been a big red meat party, it would be nice to have more seafood alternatives, such as lobster or a whole fish. I would also like to see upscale versions of local fare, such as Kurobuta pork satay."

Mr Andy Choi, 30, a manager in the telecommunications industry, spent more than \$10,000 on a barbecue, complete with chefs and a tent from Hungry BBQ for his wedding lunch attended by 300 guests last year.

On the menu were salmon fillets, prawns and steaks grilled to order.

He says: "I didn't want off-the-shelf ingredients and there was no fuss once the pit was set up. Until today, guests still remember my wedding for the food."