

## GO ESCAPE MIDWEST

# Steak your claim

In the Midwest, history books and menus both talk a lot about beef

**Matt Alderton**  
Special to USA TODAY

Midwestern winters are notoriously cold. The kind of cold that freezes your nose hairs. Even on the frostiest Friday in February, however, the Midwest can make you sweat. Not with fair-weather sports like beach volleyball, golf or mountain biking, but rather with a supersize slab of red meat.

According to scientists, “meat sweats” happen when you consume excessive amounts of protein. Because protein is the most difficult macronutrient to digest, the body requires extra energy to metabolize it. As is the case with exercise, expending extra energy creates heat, and heat creates sweat.

Although meat sweats are uncomfortable, zealous carnivores actually invite them. Nay, pursue them. Like storm chasers hunting tornadoes, they tolerate great risk for the possibility of great reward. And because the history, economy and culture of the Midwest are so intertwined with beef, the rewards are espe-

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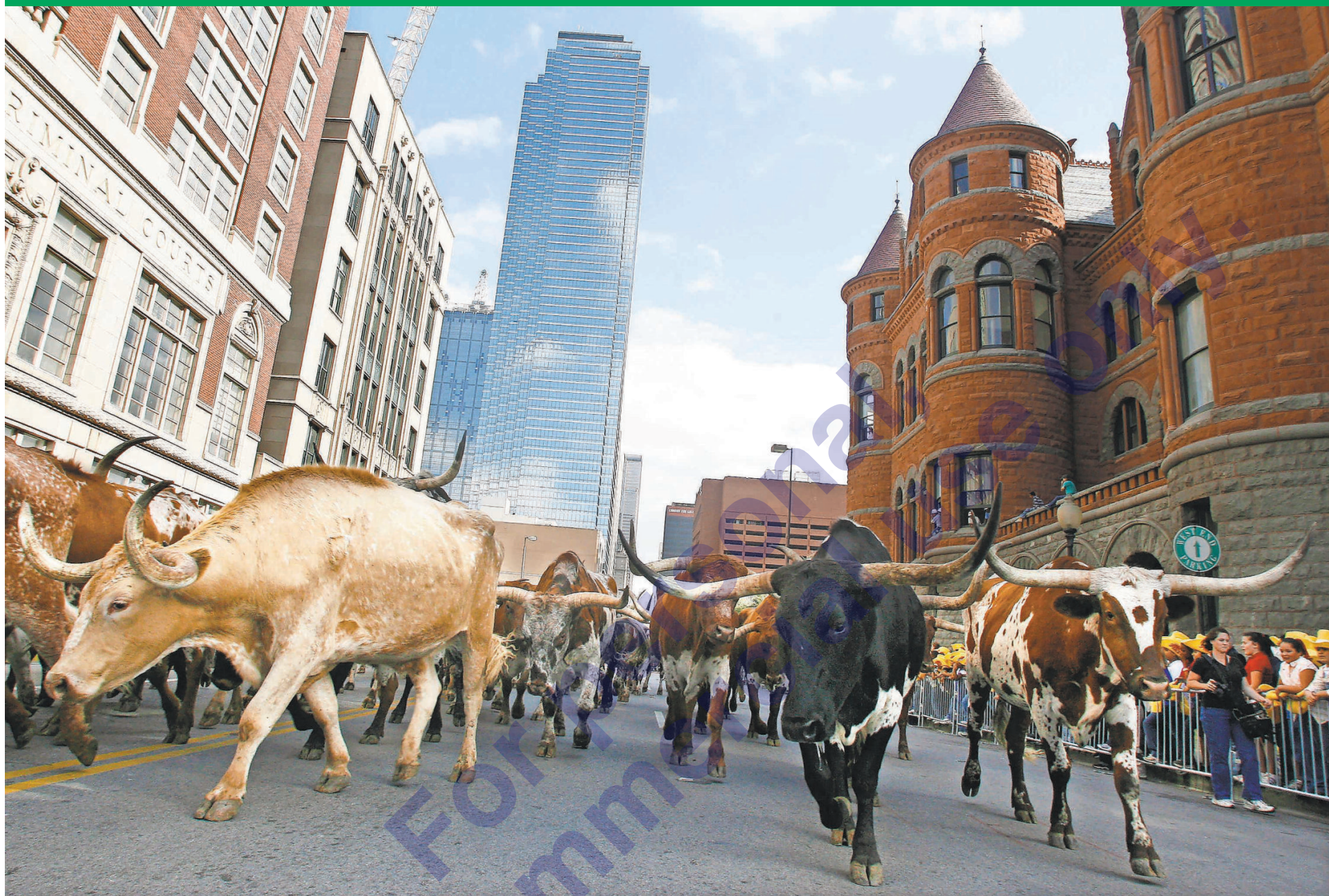
**At Jethro's Big Guys BBQ Roadhouse in Hudson, Wisconsin, try a steak dinner with slaw, chips and baked beans.**

JETHRO LUND





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cially sweet — or, to be accurate, *savory* — around these parts.

Texas is the largest beef-producing state by far, but the Midwest is well represented on the list of top states, including Nebraska, Kansas, South Dakota, Missouri, Iowa and Wisconsin.

#### A great place for cattle

The Midwest's strength in beef production is largely a function of geography, according to Joshua Specht, author of *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America*.

"North America is particularly well-suited to cattle raising because there's a lot of land, and much of it is too dry for

other kinds of agriculture without irrigation," says Specht, an assistant professor of history at the University of Notre Dame. "The reality, of course, is that ranching was predicated on taking huge amounts of land from native peoples. But settlers recognized that cattle could be raised very effectively and profitably on much of what became the United States."

Typical of Midwestern geography is Nebraska, where cattle outnumber people 3-to-1, according to Brian Fowler, vice president of procurement and product development at Omaha Steaks, which sources its famous mail-order meat from the Midwest.

"Cattle spend about 85% of their lives grazing, and we've got ample pastureland for them to do that," Fowler says. He

**Longhorn cattle in Dallas at rodeo time. Texas remains the No. 1 beef state, but the Midwest is well represented on the list of top producers.**

2005 PHOTO  
BY MATT  
SLOCUM/AP

notes that Nebraska, Kansas, and South Dakota sit atop the immense Ogallala Aquifer, whose water gives life to the grass on which cattle feed.

Flat land and plentiful water also make the Midwest ideal for growing corn — a vital ingredient in cattle ranching, because cattle often are raised on grass but finished on grain.

"When cattle are finished on grain — which is a specifically formulated diet, including corn — you end up with beef that has a buttery, slightly sweet flavor and a texture that just melts in your mouth," Fowler says. "So between our pastureland, our water and our corn, the Midwest is really the place you go for the best beef — bar none."

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**A delicious history**

History also has a lot to do with the Midwest's beef pedigree. "People who come to the United States as immigrants in the 19th century are used to eating meat as a special-occasion food," Specht says. "But the American working class can afford to have fresh beef all the time. And so beef becomes a marker of success for people who come to America."

From that working-class appetite grew a prolific beef supply chain. During momentous cattle drives, cowboys drove millions of cattle from Texas to railheads in Kansas, around which sprouted "cowtowns" like Dodge City, Abilene, Ellsworth and Wichita. From there, cattle were shipped by rail to stockyards and slaughterhouses in Omaha, Nebraska; Kansas City, Missouri; and Chicago.

"If there was one big factor that really established the Midwest for beef, it was the westward expansion of the population coupled with the growth of the railroads," Fowler says. "In the 1850s and 1860s, people started creating urban hubs in the Midwest that were the perfect location between the West Coast and the dense population centers of the East Coast."

In his 1905 novel *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair famously documented putrid conditions in the American meatpacking industry. More than a century later, the stockyards Sinclair exposed are gone, but the beef economy remains.

"When you get out of the cities, everything is part of a huge agricultural economy," says cattle rancher Barb Downey, owner of Downey Ranch in Wamego, Kansas. "If the cattle ranchers are doing well, those dollars turn over and over again in our economy. The local implement dealer does better. The grocery store does better. The coffee shop, the gas station, the hair salon, the yoga studio — all of them do better, because we are the foundational bedrock for towns and cities across the region."

**From stockyards to steakhouses**

Beef isn't cheap. COVID-19, labor shortages and inflation combined to drive the price of beef up 16% between January 2021 and January 2022. Still, there are steaks for every taste and every budget across the Midwest.

Even without the stockyards, Chicago remains a world capital for great steak, says restaurateur Amy Morton, whose father, Arnie Morton, opened the first

Morton's steakhouse in Chicago in 1978.

"Back in the '70s, Chicago didn't really have that many steakhouses to be proud of," Morton says. "So when my dad opened Morton's, he started a steakhouse boom in Chicago that continues today."

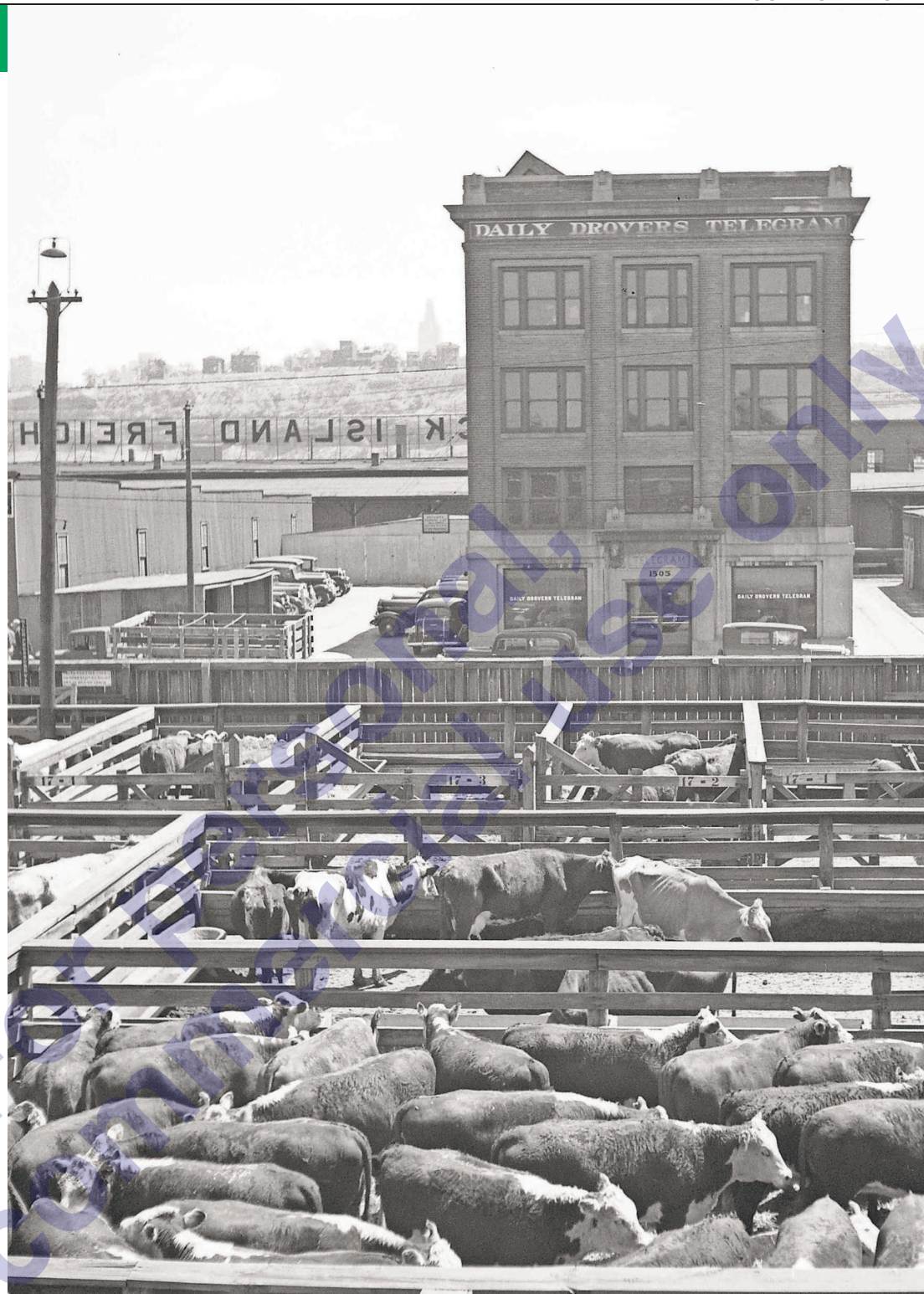
Although the original Morton's closed in 2020 due to COVID-19, a second downtown location remains. Amy Morton herself, meanwhile, has her own place, The Barn Steakhouse. Located in a former horse barn in Evanston, Illinois, just north of Chicago, it serves locally

sourced heritage Angus beef behind a nondescript alley entrance.

Other local favorites include Gibsons Bar & Steakhouse, a Chicago institution whose owner says it is the first restaurant group in the country with its own USDA certification program; Chicago Cut Steakhouse, whose river views are the perfect accompaniment to dinner; Gene & Georgetti, founded in 1941, making it Chicago's oldest steakhouse; and RPM Steak, whose 42-ounce tomahawk might

**The stockyards of Kansas City, Kansas, in 1936.**

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN/  
LIBRARY OF  
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COMPANY



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be the city's largest chop.

One of the most popular beef purveyors among Chicago restaurants is Slagel Family Farm, a sixth-generation farm in Fairbury, Illinois. For foodies who want to learn where their steaks come from, it hosts public dinners each spring through fall. Led by owner Louis John Slagel, each dinner includes a guided farm tour, a butchering demonstration and a meal prepared by a noted Chicago chef.

Chicago hardly has a Midwestern monopoly on great steak, of course. In nearby Milwaukee is one of Fowler's favorites: Five O'Clock Steakhouse, a supper club that's been slinging old-school vibes and classic steakhouse fare since 1946. Across the state, near the Minnesota border in Hudson, Wisconsin, is Jethro's Big Guys BBQ Roadhouse, whose specialties include a cold smoked ribeye and prime rib on Friday and Saturday nights. Owner Jethro Lund grew up on a cattle ranch just a mile down the road and decorated the restaurant with reclaimed wood from his family's barn.

Just across the state line are Manny's Steakhouse and Murray's in Minneapolis. Manny's serves "bull-to-table" beef — steaks sourced from its own heritage-breed herds, presented to diners on a rolling meat cart. Murray's opened in 1946 in a building that dates to the 1880s. Its specialty is a 28-ounce sirloin for two that's carved tableside. The restaurant calls it the "Silver Butter Knife Steak" because it's so tender.

To really connect with the Midwest's beefy glory days, venture deeper into the heartland — starting in Kansas City, Missouri. There, check out Jess & Jim's Steakhouse and Anton's Restaurant and Taproom, suggests Michael Coggins, co-founder of Holy Grail Steak Co., a mail-order steak company based in Kansas City. A local institution that dates to 1938, Jess & Jim's has been serving hand-cut steaks in its current location since 1957. Part pub, part butcher shop, Anton's dry-ages its steaks onsite in a special basement cooler.

Also worth a visit is the Golden Ox, which claims to have originated the Kansas City strip steak. Under new ownership since 2018, the original opened in 1949 inside the Kansas City Live Stock Exchange, the historic headquarters of the Kansas City Stockyards.

Omaha also belongs on your beef itinerary. Favorites include Gorat's Steak-

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The Golden Ox steakhouse opened in 1949 inside the Kansas City Live Stock Exchange. The original restaurant closed in 2014, then reopened under new management after an extensive renovation in 2018. KAITLYN WEDD



The Golden Ox claims it originated the Kansas City strip steak. Above, a bone-in KC strip (top) and the boneless New York version KAITLYN WEDD

From left: Golden Ox co-owners Wes Gartner (also executive chef) and Jill Myers, and Bill Haw Sr., who owns the eatery's historic building. TODD ZIMMER



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house and Cascio's Steak & Pizza House, both of which serve Omaha Steaks beef, according to Fowler. While Gorat's is known for its clientele — it's a favorite of Warren Buffet, who orders the 22-ounce and a Cherry Coke — Cascio's is legendary for its Italian roots.

Also notable is Johnny's Café, which opened in 1922 next to the Omaha Stockyards. Last year, it was part of the Nebraska Beef Council's inaugural Nebraska Beef Passport program, through which diners receive discounts and prizes for eating at participating restaurants. The program returns this year from May until September, with approximately 50 restaurants stamping passports.

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**Brian Fowler**

vice president of procurement  
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Still hungry? Head to Kansas, suggests Suzanne Ryan-Numrich, international trade director at the Kansas Department of Agriculture, whose favorite spots are Munson's Prime in Junction City, Kansas, and LABCo Restaurant & Market in Manhattan, Kansas — both of which are owned in whole or in part by local ranchers and cattlemen. Unfortunately, Munson's Prime was destroyed in a fire in 2021. But its owners recently announced plans to open a new restaurant in Abilene, Kansas. That place, Legacy Kansas, which will debut this summer inside the Brookville Hotel, a historic restaurant that opened in 1870 and closed in 2020. Alongside locally raised beef from Munson Angus Farms, it will serve the famous fried chicken dinners for which the Brookville Hotel was known.

Grab your napkin, and let the meat sweats commence.

**Great beef comes ground, too:  
a Western-style cheeseburger topped  
with bacon, onion strings and barbecue  
sauce at Big Guys BBQ Roadhouse,  
in Hudson, Wisconsin. JETHRO LUND**

