

A Southern Idaho gem, finger steaks are tough to reproduce at home

Shawn Vestal/SR

When I visit my family in Southern Idaho, I will often get my hands on a basket of finger steaks before I hug my mother.

That has more to do with geography than the order of my affections. If I fly, I get off a plane in Boise, drive a rental car down Vista Avenue to the Bad Boy Burgers drive-through, and hit the freeway home, traveling at a rate of roughly one finger steak per mile.

Apologies to Mom, but there's something appropriate about this hierarchy: The finger steak is Idaho's signature food. Our Philly cheesesteak. Our Cincinnati chili. People have been clamoring – OK, I have been clamoring – to put them on the state license plate for years.

What about our famous potatoes? Sorry, but the spud is everywhere. It's about as unique to Idaho as a hamburger. Finger steaks, on the other hand, are rarely found outside the Gem State – though you can hunt them down in places that are Idaho-adjacent, like Spokane, and Texans try to claim them (they also call them “steak fingers,” which I think we can agree completely invalidates their case). Those of us who appreciate finger steaks often find ourselves describing them to people who grew up, tragically, in other places, and these people often look at us as if we are insane.



We are not insane. Finger steaks are good, and if you want to find the best of them, you should be looking in Southern Idaho.

But what if you don't live near Boise? Or near the places where you grew up eating them – for me, that's the Lincoln Inn in Gooding and the Oxbow Café in Bliss? Can Idahoans yearning for the comforts of home produce these deep-fried strips of beef – the original protein bar – for themselves?

More importantly: Should they? Or are finger steaks, like the Ark of the Covenant, a mystery better left unboxed?

Origin story

The legend of the finger steak starts in Milo's Tavern in Boise in the 1950s, where the owner reportedly came up with the idea of taking strips of steak, two to three inches long and a half-inch around, breading them and deep-frying them.

Ain't much to it. This remains the essential thing, and in my experience there isn't that much difference among them. Done right – whether it's a place that hand-cuts them or dumps them, frozen, out of a bag into a fryer – they are hot, juicy, beefy, crispy, sometimes a bit tangy, ultimately a combination of very simple, satisfying sensations. It's important to dunk them in something, usually horseradishy cocktail sauce. My preference is a two-dip tango: one bite with cocktail sauce, one bite with fry sauce, repeat.

Milo's has long since become a "gentleman's" club – "Home of the Valley's Hottest Dancers" – which is interesting because finger steaks are kind of a "gentleman's" food: furtive, seedy, greasy, with a hangover of regret. A year ago, the Boise Weekly did a citywide survey of "Boise's famous finger steaks," describing the dish this way: "Perhaps even more than its Southern cousin, the chicken-fried steak, the finger steak has shrugged off all pretense associated with the word 'steak' to make its home in plastic baskets at some of the state's dingiest dives."

Where I'm from, the "dingiest dives" are often called "the town restaurant." We didn't wrestle much over questions of pretense. The finger steak does indeed come from this world – the spectrum of basketed American heart-attack fare – but it also, for some of us, has associations every bit as potent as Proust's little cookie.

For me, that traces back to the Lincoln Inn, a restaurant that operated on Main Street in Gooding when I was growing up, and was, almost certainly, where I first had finger steaks. I remember them fondly. I called up the Lincoln Inn recently, wondering if I could discover the secret of these finger steaks, and found that the Lincoln Inn was no longer even there. It is now the Cowboy Inn and Saloon, with new owners as of July.

Jeanine Cunningham, the owner and cook, had moved from a restaurant near Emmett, where she cooked her own version of finger steaks for years.

"I cook an awful lot of them," she said. "I've been cooking and serving these kind of finger steaks for years – I've served well over a million dollars' worth."

She agrees that finger steaks are Idaho's thing.

"I was in the service, so I've been all over," she said. "I'd never heard of them until I came to Idaho."

One of the first steps Cunningham took with the Cowboy Inn menu was replace the premade frozen finger steaks with her own fresh handmade ones: cube steak she trims, breads and deep-fries. She says they've been a big hit.

But they are also not the ones I grew up eating. I told Cunningham that I might call the Oxbow Café, in the tiny neighboring town of Bliss, to see if they were still serving the same ones.

"They closed down about three weeks ago," she said.

You can't go home again. But you can go somewhere nearby. When I was last in Boise, I had a basket of finger steaks at one of the places in town that claims them loudly and proudly: the West Side Drive-In. Their finger steaks – hand-cut shoulder meat, tempura-battered – came piled atop a basket of tater tots, with a side of cocktail sauce. These finger steaks were featured on the Food Network's "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives," and they were great – beefy and tender and piled so high that I soon regretted having eaten so many.

The true test

When it came to making my own, I had a few simple goals: Tender steak, crispy batter, a pleasing, well-seasoned bite. Nothing fancy (though I would dearly love to see Santé's Jeremy Hansen or Central Food's David Blaine attack the finger steak with their culinary jujitsu).

One more quality was key, as pointed out by my brother-in-law, who lives in Boise and has studied the species closely: "The true test of a great finger steak," he told me, pantomiming taking a bite, "is whether you can take a bite without pulling the breading off."

This did indeed become the biggest challenge in my own home trial. I started out thinking I would test different ingredients. I bought some sirloin and a ribeye steak. (My butcher told me in no uncertain terms that I was crazy to abuse a ribeye this way.) I looked into breading and battering alternatives, and checked out a lot of recipes online.

In the end, the important factors lay in two ingredients that I would not have guessed: buttermilk and cornstarch.

As Cunningham – the million-dollar finger-steak maker – told me, a soak in buttermilk tenderizes the steak. Some recipes call for an overnight soak, some called for an hour or two; I went with a shorter soak, but even then noticed that, in addition to tenderness, the buttermilk gave the final product the tanginess that I had always associated with finger steaks but never quite identified.

And the cornstarch, dusted onto the steak before breading, helped the breading adhere to the steak and satisfy my brother-in-law's major criterion.

I tried several different approaches blended with the two kinds of steak, cut into strips about the size of a you-know-what. I burned the first batch in oil that was way too hot. New oil and lower heat brought even browning, but the breading and the meat were twain. The coating slipped off like a greasy glove, leaving the steak clenched in my teeth like a cigar.

Food editor Adriana Janovich, my accomplice in this endeavor, suggested we try something that had worked last year when we made corn dogs: dusting the steak pieces in cornstarch before breading. This worked perfectly. Right out of the oil the finger steaks were tender and tasty, and the breading stuck. My butcher was correct, though – fixing a ribeye this way was needlessly expensive, and actually not as good as the sirloin.

In the end, I made some decent finger steaks. Adriana thought they were an improvement over the fast-food trip we made for research. I thought it might have been a tie. Or something like that. Maybe what I mean is that finger steaks are only ever so good, and their goodness is based on simplicity, on fried-meatiness, and like other foods on the American heart-attack spectrum, they taste good in the moment and not upon reflection or comparison. The best finger steak, in other words, is the one you're eating right now.

But to return to my initial question: Is this a dish for the home cook? Perhaps for one who likes to fry things and doesn't mind the sheen and stink that it radiates all over the house. Perhaps for homesick Idahoan who is desperate for finger steaks, with no accommodating restaurant in sight.

As for me, I travel home frequently enough to get my fix. I'm sure that I haven't eaten my last finger steak, but I've probably cooked my last one.

Idaho Finger Steaks

Adapted from several sources

First, put on some music. Bachman-Turner Overdrive or Bad Company would be good choices. Kansas might work in a pinch. Pick up some steak – inexpensive sirloin or tri-tip are perfectly fine. Make yourself a drink if that's your thing. Prepare to get greasy.

1 pound beef sirloin or cube steak, half-inch thick

2 cups buttermilk

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

4 teaspoons kosher salt

2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper

2 teaspoons granulated garlic

2 teaspoons dry mustard

Vegetable oil, for frying

Cornstarch

2 cups all-purpose flour

Trim the excess fat and silverskin from the steak and cut into strips about ½-inch wide and 2 to 3 inches long. Whisk together the buttermilk, Worcestershire, 2 teaspoons of the salt and 1 teaspoon each of the black pepper, granulated garlic and dry mustard in a bowl. Add the steak strips to the buttermilk mixture and refrigerate for 2 hours.

Heat 3 inches of oil in a Dutch oven to 350 degrees. Whisk together the flour, the remaining 2 teaspoons salt and 1 teaspoon each of the black pepper, granulated garlic, dry mustard and paprika in a shallow dish. Strain the meat, reserving the buttermilk mixture, and dust the pieces with cornstarch.

In batches, dredge the strips into the seasoned flour, then back into the buttermilk mixture, and back again into the seasoned flour. Dip the double-dredged strips carefully into the hot oil. You will need to fry them in batches to avoid overcrowding. When the strips are golden brown and crisp, about 4 minutes, remove them with a slotted spoon onto a paper-towel-lined plate. Serve immediately with french fries and cocktail or barbecue sauce.

