

Skirt steak

Women who crave a characterful cut, sharpen your knives: this autumn, London's first 'female-friendly' steakhouse fires up. **Kate Lowenstein** gets the skinny on the girl-centric grill



In 1905, two decades after the venerated Keens steakhouse opened in New York's theatre district, actress (and mistress of King Edward VII) Lillie Langtry took the restaurant to court for not allowing women to dine there. She won, the story goes, and promptly swept in wearing her feathered boa, thus beginning the feminine corruption of the gentlemen-only meatfest. One hundred-odd years later and two dozen city blocks south, this beef between the sexes arrived at its inevitable conclusion: STK, a "female-friendly" steakhouse, opened in the city's Meatpacking District. That was 2006; in the years since, the restaurant has taken hold in Miami, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and midtown Manhattan. In September, London will join the lady-centric ranks, with a branch of STK set to open in Covent Garden.

Female-friendly, maybe, but one look at STK's trademark image reveals that this isn't exactly radical feminism at work: a model in red lingerie holds a metal hook on which hangs a raw chop; in another shot, crimson lips suggestively graze a cube of rare meat. On a recent Friday night at the midtown Manhattan location, throngs of young women in miniskirts and animal prints tottered around on spectacularly high heels. "This is nothing – you should have seen last night," remarked the general manager as he got to work setting a table for the soon-to-arrive New York Giants football team. "We served a record 502 meals and [eccentric American basketball star] Dennis Rodman showed up with his boyfriend, his girlfriend and his bodyguard." The Giants? Dennis Rodman? One starts to wonder who the target audience here really is. With white leather banquets and an ever-present DJ holding court over slickly attired diners, STK seems to appeal most of all to *femme-fatale* types and the inevitable crop of men who travel in their wake.

"Women have worked out how to make us think we control the world, but the truth of the matter is, they do," says Jonathan Segal,

CEO of the One Group, owner of STK. Segal's business strategy was to feminise a historically masculine conceit by broadening the menu and "lightening" the decor. "We did a small survey of friends, and the women said they liked steakhouses but were intimidated by all the dark wood and the sombre atmosphere," he explains. "Also, women don't want a whole cow on their plate." Steaks are, instead, sold like T-shirts, in small (six to ten ounces), medium (ten to 14 ounces) and large (24 or 34 ounces), and the menu proffers a voluptuous array of salads (jumbo lump crab with green melon, avocado and mache greens), sensible sides (broccolini; Brussels sprouts), and thoughtful fish dishes (halibut with baby vegetables, corn purée and poblano vinaigrette). The Covent Garden STK promises to be much the same as the American iterations, with their cream, black and purple colour scheme, Seventies and Eighties rock soundtrack, and emphasis on boozing and flirting rather than stuffing yourself silly.

But the question must be asked: is the "female-friendly" concept filling a nonexistent void? This is 2012, after all, a time when Little Black Dress Vodka ("by women, for women – and with an eye toward calorie count") launched with great fanfare, only to be met with brush-off from its intended audience, and Molson Coors' "bloat-resistant" beer, which aimed to "break down the barriers between women and beer", roundly did not. Do women really need things custom-made for their gender?

But while overtly fuchsia, calorie-conscious attempts at pandering to the fairer sex are destined to fail, it seems that there is indeed room for STK's more subtle approach to "female-friendly", which is actually just code for "broadly accessible". In today's world of pescatarians, "flexitarians", "paleotarians" and the like, it behoves any eatery to expand its purview beyond meat, potatoes and creamed spinach. This is confirmed by Alex Reilly, managing director of Loungers, a UK company that launched the female-friendly Cosy Club ("think gents' club meets village hall meets cricket pavilion") in 2010, and has since seen it grow from one location to four (in Bath, Stamford, Taunton and Exeter), with three more branches opening in 2012.

"Women make up 60 per cent of our revenue, so we've created a space where they can feel welcome." The key to this? Good coffee and decent wines. Ultimately, the same is true for STK – "female-friendly" is represented by an expansion of the menu and a loosening of the traditionally rigid defining qualities of a steakhouse. The result is male-friendly, too: "We have as many men as women ordering the small steak and the salads," Segal says.

Not much is subtle at this bar-lounge-meat-market-restaurant hybrid, but its business plan flies under the radar. "This place is aimed at women?" asked a tipsy customer as she swayed by the bar. "No wonder the bathrooms are so nice. We just came because this is where the beef is." She did not appear to be talking about the food. Lillie Langtry would likely approve. **GQ**

STK opens in September in ME Hotel London on Great Portland Street, London W1. stkhouse.com



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The Dukan diet

A steakhouse menu is perfect for Phase 1 of Dukan, during which you're eating all the lean protein you want. For Phase 2 (which also allows unlimited non-starchy veg), opt for steamed broccolini.

If you're on the Atkins diet

A plethora of options here, as you're allowed a liberal helping of meat or seafood. Go for a cut of steak or the fish of the day, accompanied by a blue iceberg salad with smoked bacon and blue cheese.

If you're on the Paleo diet

The cavewoman diet emphasises eating organic meats, so opt for the organic chicken breast, but ask for a green salad in place of the green beans. To start: tuna tartare with pecans and avocado (skip the corn tuille).