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On A Mission: From Pied-A-Terre To Tableau – Searching For The City’s Best Steak Frites

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by Claire Lassam | Setting rare to well aside, there are, in this girl's opinion, really just two kinds of steak-eaters: those who like their meat tender at the expense of taste, and those who prefer to chew for flavour. If you're in the first category, you probably spend a lot of money on tenderloins when you go out for dinner, and that's lovely. Really it is, but this article is not for you. That's because this piece is about *steak frites*, and when you get to a proper one you get a thick, juicy, chewy steak. Sure, it will have a bit of gristle and some fat, but it will be well marbled and – if you're in luck – it will have been marinated long enough so that when you take your first bite, the meat gives way easily.

It should be a hanger steak, but a flank or a skirt steak will do. On the plate (or next to it) will be frites, a sauce of some type, and – hopefully – some freshly made mayo. That's all you need for perfection.

The frites should be about the width of a pencil, and very crispy; the kind of crispy that comes from double frying so that when you get to the ones at the bottom of the plate they aren't soggy. That's very important.

The sauce is also vital, but the type is often left up to you. Any good steak frites will come with a few options, usually a red wine jus, a Bearnaise, a herb butter, a peppercorn sauce or one laden with mushrooms. I'm nearly always a sucker for a mushroom sauce, but sometimes if I'm feeling crazy or, as in the case for this article when I ate 5 steak frites in relatively rapid succession, I'll mix things up a bit and get the peppercorn. And, as I intimated above, a good steak frites should come with mayo. If it isn't on your plate when it arrives, you may not be in a very good restaurant.

To find the perfect steak frites on this mission, I only went to French bistros, and by that I mean places with large French wine lists and Boris on the beer list; the small, cozy kind of restaurant where for an appetiser you can get a solid onion tart or freshly shucked oysters (preferably both).

My search started out with a bang at **Tableau** in Coal Harbour, despite the fact that it broke a few rules. It was a sirloin steak, for starters, and it came with just one sauce (my beloved peppercorn). But it was a beautiful steak – very thick, and perfectly cooked; quite bloody in the middle but nice and charred on the outside. It had a bit of chew and just enough sauce to smear on each cut. The frites came on the side and were a deep golden colour with a big pot of home made aoli. And to really put things over the top, there was also a salad on the plate. That's not essential, but a very nice perk indeed. For \$18, it was also the cheapest steak I'd have on this mission. Afterwards, I suspected that I had already found the best steak frites in town, but I didn't mind soldiering on to a few other places.

My suspicions definitely rang true at **Jules**, where a very thin piece of rib eye was served with a lacklustre sauce and under-seasoned fries. So too at **Les Faux Bourgeois**, where my hanger steak definitely satisfied – grilled instead of pan seared, which I liked – but the seasoning was off and the sauce was too thin to coat the meat well. It was even true at **La Brasserie**, my go-to French bistro on most nights. There, my steak was slightly over-cooked.

I was already writing this in my head when I went to **Pied a Terre**, where I was plated a glorious piece of meat. It was very thick, perfectly seasoned, and beautifully marbled. The hand cut frites were crisped all the way through and came with the best lemony mayo I'd had anywhere. For extras, there was a stuffed tomato and some creamed spinach, but the best part for me was the peppercorn sauce. Every sauce I'd had so far was a modern style jus, but this was a traditional sauce, perhaps made with a roux. I don't always like a sauce that thick and rich, but this particular steak required it. The only thing tough to swallow was the \$34 price tag. At nearly double the price of of Tableau's, it had better sprout wings and fly. It was still my favourite all round, but the next time I have a hankering for red meat on the cheap, it's Tableau all the way.