



**ABOVE:** The 9-ounce filet, seared with a sprinkle of Montreal steak seasoning and topped with a Parmesan-butter crust, is a Johnny's Italian Steakhouse favorite, cooked up by head chef Robin Tracy. **BELOW:** For nice crosshatch grill marks, rotate steaks about 45 degrees after two minutes without turning them over, then turn over and repeat the same process on the other side. Use tongs, not a fork, to move the steaks so no juice is lost.

# superb steak

Steakhouse chefs share their tips and recipes

Story by **JOHN O'CONNELL**  
 Photographs by **RON JOHNSON**  
 of the Journal Star



**R**obin Tracy has learned a thing or two about preparing the perfect steak during his years of cooking at Peoria restaurants.

The 43-year-old, longtime Peoria chef has been with Johnny's Italian Steakhouse at The Shoppes at Grand Prairie for the past year. While the restaurant's menu includes various chicken, seafood and Italian specialties, steaks like Parmesan-crust New York strip or Steak Sinatra are signature dishes. The latter is a 6- or 9-ounce filet topped with a garlic cream sauce that includes sundried tomatoes, mushrooms, basil, shrimp and crab meat. This topping is one of the most frequently requested items in the restaurant.

For great steakhouse taste, Tracy has some tips for grilling steaks at home. The "perfect steak" begins with a good cut of beef, he said.

"You want to choose a tender cut that is bright red in color and well-marbled," Tracy said, referring to thin streaks of fat running through the meat.

"If you don't start with a good cut of beef, no amount of seasoning or sauces is going to make it tender."

Examples of the best quality cuts are filet mignon, New York strip, T-bone and ribeye. When grilling at home, start with a hot grill, the chef advised. Steaks need high heat to sear the meat and seal in the juices.

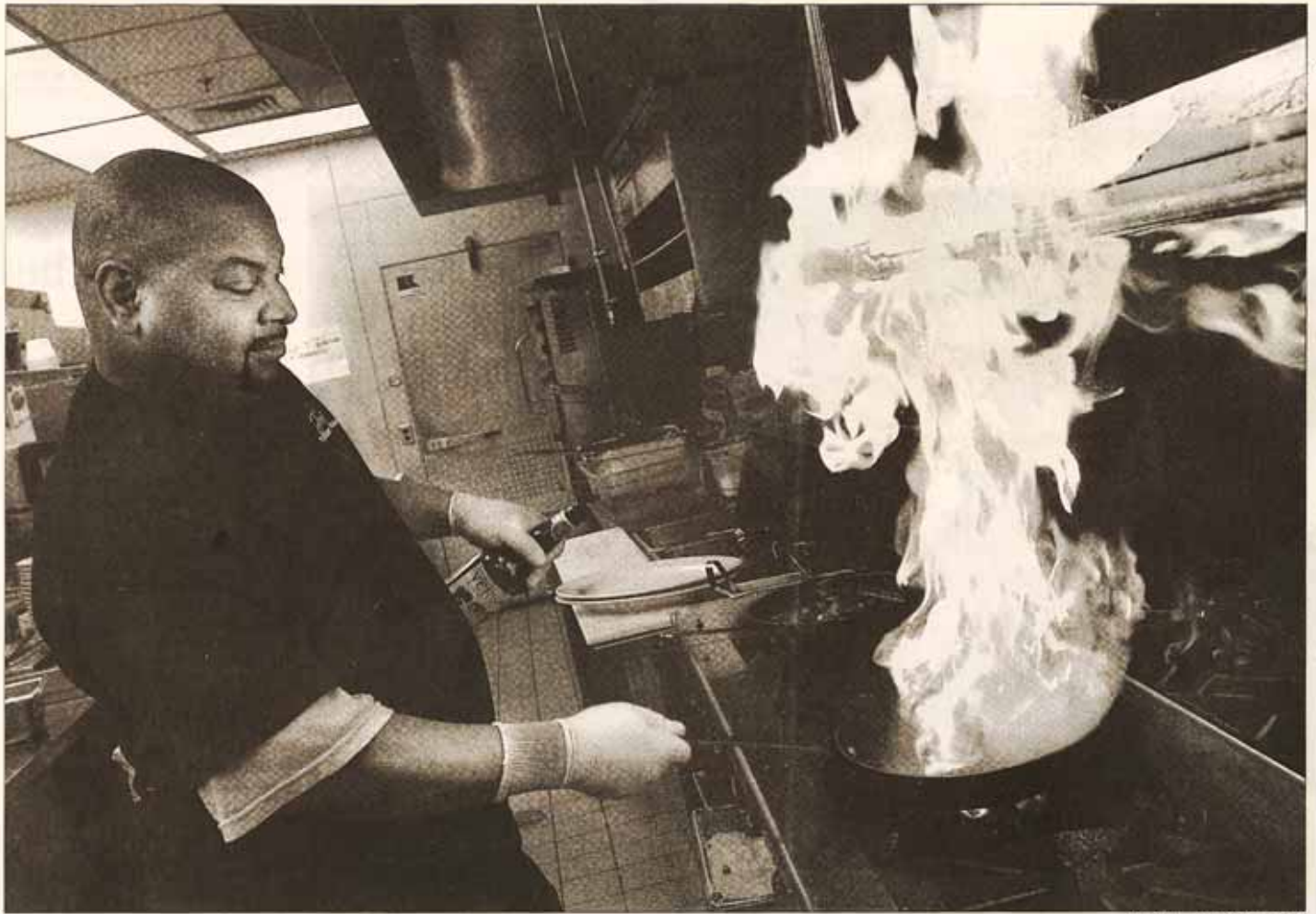
Experts also advise not plopping the steak on a grill

directly from the refrigerator. The steak should rest a few minutes to allow its juices to spread evenly. Tracy seasons the top and bottom of the steak with a blend of spices and herbs. He prefers Montreal Steak Seasoning made by McCormick.

Tracy's fellow chef John Hudson cooks steaks by placing them on the hot grill and then rotating the steak about 45 degrees after two minutes without turning it over. He cooks it for another two minutes and then turns the steak over and repeats the same process on the other side. The steak is cooked for a total of four minutes on each side.

Rotating the steak creates nice crosshatch grill marks for presentation. When rotating the steak or turning it over, use tongs, the chefs advised. Stabbing the meat with a fork will cause juice to run from the steak and dry it out.

Cooking time is going to vary according to the grill temperature and thickness of the meat. Both Tracy and Hudson can judge a steak's doneness by its appearance and touch. But they use an internal meat thermometer to be certain and safe. An internal temperature of 135 degrees is considered medium rare; 150 degrees is medium; 165 degrees is medium well; and 170 degrees is well done, according to information at heartlandsteaks.com.



RON JOHNSON/JOURNAL STAR

Johnny's Italian Steakhouse head chef Robin Tracy fires up the kitchen while preparing a meal. Tracy is known for his tasty steaks.

## STEAK

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To prevent bacterial contamination, the chefs advise using a clean platter to serve the steaks when they are done cooking.

"Don't ever mix old and new products together," Tracy said. "And don't cook beef and chicken on the same side of the grill. You risk getting salmonella (a bacterial infection)."

While Tracy prefers just seasoning on his steaks, many customers request steaks with special sauces, such as Sinatra Sauce or special butter crust toppings, which are made in the kitchen. The restaurant offers horseradish, blue cheese and Parmesan cheese flavors in butter crust toppings.

After cooking one steak, Tracy covered the entire steak with a Parmesan butter crust and inserted it in a salamander oven to broil it and melt the cheese into a crust.

"The crusts serve to add flavor and seal in the juices of steaks," Tracy said.

"A delicious steak with rice or baked potato, steamed broccoli or steamed asparagus can make a meal you won't soon forget."

Tracy is a familiar face with many restaurant-goers in the

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I liked helping her in the kitchen when I was young.

I got to the point that I was asking her if I could cook breakfast and dinner."

Robin Tracy, chef at Johnny's Italian Steakhouse

Peoria area.

Not only has he cooked at many area restaurants over the years, the chef is featured once a week on a television cooking segment during the last 10 minutes of WEEK-TV's 5 p.m. news program on Thursdays.

He has been hosting this promotional television segment for Johnny's Italian Steakhouse for the past year.

"I've probably cooked everything on Johnny's menu along with some of my own special recipes," Tracy said. "People are starting to recognize me from the TV spots. I have had people come in here and say, 'Hey, you're the guy who cooks on TV.'"

The cooking segments are taped in advance at the restaurant. For cameraman Steve Shaw, it's a choice assignment.

"Robin is not pretentious," Shaw said. "He's a very nice guy and a very good cook. When we get done taping, I'll sample some of the dishes and bring some back to the station. My favorite is Steak Deburgo."

There are some occasional bloopers while taping that TV viewers never see.

Tracy recalled cooking a spaghetti dish with the help of his son, Raemere, 6.

"My son dropped the noodles for the spaghetti dish," Tracy said. "There's been a few things like that."

### Peoria upbringing

Reared in the Peoria area, Tracy went to Pleasant Valley Grade School and Limestone Community High School in Bartonville. His ambition as a young man was to be a policeman. After a stint in the U.S. Air Force, he came back to Peoria and found himself in the food industry.

"Basically, I got my interest in cooking watching my mother cook," Tracy recalled. "I liked helping her in the kitchen when I was young. I got to the point that I was asking her if I could cook breakfast and dinner."

Tracy learned to cook on the job. His resume includes cooking at or managing such places as

Chi-Chi's, Cheddars, Rainwater's and Outback Steakhouse, where he worked for eight years. He was working at Vonachen's Old Place before going to Johnny's a year ago. Today, Tracy heads the restaurant's cooking staff for the independently-owned company with restaurants in Madison, Wis., Omaha, Neb., Des Moines, Iowa, and Moline, as well as Peoria.

### Supper club style

"Johnny's is reminiscent of a 1940s-style supper club," said Nick Cox, the restaurant's local general manager. "We have a lot of prints on the wall of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and the rest of the Rat Pack."

Cox said he and Tracy work closely together at the restaurant.

"Robin is a great chef," Cox said. "We became good friends right from the start. We definitely look to him at becoming a better restaurant."

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