

Santa Maria Tri-Tip Steaks: Poor Man's Prime Rib

http://www.amazingribs.com/recipes/beef/santa_maria_tri-tip_steaks.html

In the beautiful Central Coast town of Santa Maria on California Highway 101, there are big ranches, plenty of cattle, and ocean breezes that whisper "bah-be-quuuuuuu".

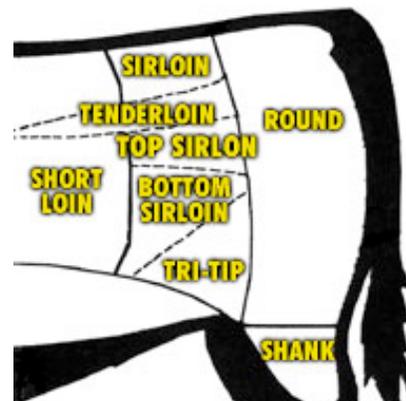
Originally settled by Mexican cowboys called *vaqueros*, Santa Maria has an international reputation for their local specialty, tri-tip steak, the unique grill they invented to cook it, and the clever way they carve it to make it tender.

The story goes that in the 1950s a Safeway butcher named Bob Schutz was overstocked on ground beef and stew meat, so he took a curved muscle from the bottom sirloin usually destined for chopping or grinding, and put it on his store's rotisserie. He and his staff were shocked at how flavorful and tender it was. He called it tri-tip and started promoting it as a barbecue meat.

Nowadays, when you say barbecue in this beautiful slice of Californiana, with beaches and mountains, you are talking tri-tip, not ribs or brisket.

Tri-tip is a crescent shaped muscle from the bottom sirloin just in front of the hip. A typical tri-tip might be about 8" long, 3" wide in the center, and 3" thick in the center, tapering at the ends, and weighing 1.5 to 2 pounds. It is available in every grocery of butcher shop in Southern California, but it is hard to find elsewhere. If you don't live on the left bank, your butcher should be able to special order it. Tell her it is the *tensor fasciae latae* muscle from the bottom sirloin, and it is number 185C in the [NAMP book](#), the butcher's bible.

It has big beefy flavor, it is very lean, so it can be on the chewy side if you don't cook and slice it properly. But cook and slice it the way they do in Santa Maria, and you can have a piece almost as tender, and every bit as juicy as prime rib.



The Santa Maria style grill is perfect for this cut. It has a grate that can be raised or lowered with a crank so the grillmaster can control the heat on this thick hunk-o-flesh, crucial to get it done properly without burning it to a crisp. The model shown here is from the [Santa Maria BBQ Outfitters](#). The fuel of choice in Santa Maria is red oak logs, it is prepped with minimal seasoning, and served without sauce so the big beefy flavor reigns.

It is almost always taken off the grill when medium rare, the temp at which it is most tender, and accompanied by grill toasted bread to mop up the juices, a salsa like pico di gallo, pinto beans, [macaroni and cheese](#), salad, and the excellent local wines. Pinto bean are small and pink and another local tradition.

Special thanks to Harry Stewart of [The Great American Barbecue](#) in Alameda, CA for teaching me how to cut tri-tip. Those are his hands below.

Santa Maria Tri-Tip Steak Recipe

Serves. 4.

Preparation time. 5 minutes to season, 60 to 90 minutes to come to room temp.

Cooking time. 45 to 90 minutes depending on how you set up your grill.

Ingredients

1 tri-tip steak
Vegetable oil
Salt
Ground fresh black pepper
Garlic powder

About the oil. Use a light, mild flavor oil like canola or corn oil.

About the spices. Although it is not traditional in Santa Maria, I love using my [Big Bad Beef Rub](#) instead of the spices above. Lay it on thick.

Do this

1) Take the meat from the fridge about an hour before cooking so it can come to room temp. This lets the enzymes that tenderize beef start work. Coat it with a light layer of cooking oil, sprinkle it with a heavy coating of spices. Massage it in and let it sit at room temp for an hour until you are ready to cook. Don't worry about over-seasoning. When you're done you're going to cut it into thin slices so each slice will have only a small lip

of flavorful crust. And don't worry about letting it sit at room temp. If there are any microbes on the surface, 10 seconds at 150°F will nuke them.

2) Set up your grill for [2-zone indirect cooking](#) with one side of your grill scorching hot and the other about 225°F to 250°F.

3) Because this is a thick hunk of flesh, we can't put it close to high heat or the exterior will carbonize long before the center even warms. In Santa Maria, where the grills have a built-in elevator, they raise the meat up and flip it frequently during a cook that typically lasts as long as an hour. This long slow cooking lets the tenderizer enzymes really do their stuff. Unless you have a Santa Maria style grill (I have a [Hasty Bake oven](#) that is perfect for tri-tip because it cranks up and down like a Santa Maria grill), put the meat first on the indirect heat side of your grill with the thick end closer to the heat, close the lid, turn it every 20 minutes or so, and wait until the center hits about 110°F, or about 10°F below your target temp. This can take 30 to 45 minutes, but you must use a good digital instant read thermometer to get the temp right, especially if you are not experienced with this cut. Then move the meat over direct high heat for about 5 minutes per side or until it gets a nice dark even sear. I like to take it up to about 130°F for medium rare. I know this is different than they do it in Santa Maria where they sear the meat first, but the fact is, this method is better. You will get a more even color through the meat if you sear in the rear.

4) Now here's the trick to carving it. Begin with a carving board that has deep valleys cut into it or else the juice will run away from you. You will not believe how juicy this is if cooked medium rare or less. Slice it first in half through the center as in the photos. Then rotate each half and cut it from the tip to the cut end, across the grain, in 3/8 to 1/2" slices. Cutting across the grain insures that it will be easier to chew. Fan the slices on a platter, pour the juices on top, and serve with grilled garlic bread to sop up the juices. If there are any leftovers, store it and the juices, and it makes great sandwiches.

