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Madison's beef houses aim for higher steaks

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The second of a four-part series highlighting the Madison Essentials, restaurants that help define local dining.

There was an era within many of our lifetimes when Madison's restaurant scene was dominated largely by "supper clubs," probably the closest thing to a steakhouse that the previous generation could imagine. Supper clubs still exist, of course, but usually in smaller communities within the state.

In Madison, that role has been taken over by restaurants specializing in prime cuts of beef, fresh seafood or perhaps both. In many cases, they are among the city's best restaurants, as well as some of its most expensive. When it's simply chef against meat, there are rarely sauces to cover the shortfall, either in product or execution. Exceptional preparation truly does shine.

When it comes to Essential Steak and Seafood, here are our recommendations:

- Although it could fit into a number of categories, the Capitol Chophouse in the Hilton Madison Monona Terrace (9 E. Wilson St., 255-5100) draws its strength from the basics, which in the hands of chefs Craig Summers and Tony Lemens are anything but basic. From the succulent tenderloin filet to fresh king salmon roasted on a cedar plank, the restaurant does an exceptional job bringing out the flavors of the high-quality cuts. The portions are hearty and the entrees highly satisfying.