

# Bad Steaks to Blame

*Edd and Nina Hendee's Taste of Texas, a story of failure and fortune.*

*Story and photos by Laura Conaway, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

There was a kind of “whoosh,” like a candle just lit, turning to flame.

Quick on his feet, an ever-poised waiter walked briskly to the front of the restaurant, politely inquiring of its owners.

“Did you see that lady on fire at table 55?”

Edd and Nina Hendee rushed to assist the situation.

Decades removed, the Texas duo can find humor in the retelling of the mishap.

They sit at ease in the side room of their beloved Taste of Texas Restaurant in Houston. It's the room where President George W. Bush dined during his presidency.

If they've any walls of poise and professionalism, they're down.

“You see,” Edd recalls with a pause and chuckle. “This woman came in and she had BIG hair.”

Nina adds for flare. “Texas-girl hair, she just ignited!”

With that, the couple burst into their own bout of laughter. In nearly perfect unison they grab hands and throw a punch line like it's been rehearsed: “But what could possibly go wrong in the restaurant business?”

“Oh, don't even go there,” Nina says, Edd holding a facetious grin. It's as if muttering the words will put a curse on the place.

“Well, the door could open,” she

begins, “or the door could fall off the hinges. Or the customer could hit the light pole in the parking lot and knock it over.”



Quoting her late father, Nina says of legacy: “You can't ever just take up space. In your community, your home, whatever you do, you've got to make a difference.”

Stuff happens.

“Tell them about the history tour, the cooking tour, the ambulance and the fire truck here all at the same time,” Edd ribs his bride.

She gestures that it was no big thing, crosses her left leg over her right and smiles: “Just another day on the ranch.”

And it is, in their own way. Two hundred employees, triple that many guests, it's a lot to tackle — even under a 20,000-square-foot roof. If it starts to feel overwhelming, they think of the ranchers they call partners, and hope the ranchers think of them as the same.

“What's our broken water trough

at 2 a.m. in February? It's when our employees' lives basically blow up or they're not working out or they're having problems because of choices

they've made,” Edd says. “We're in the people business.”

He and Nina were made for it.

“Look into my eyes,” you'll hear her say. In the moment she's talking to a busload of 4th graders scattered at her feet for a Texas history tour. “Look into my eyes,” she says again as they shift and focus.

Her costumes and expressions bring the Texas giants to

life for them.

“Those kids, they're amazing,” Nina says. She's led as many as 400,000 single-file through the kitchen and out the other side to a meal, but why the unique request?

“I want them to see transparency when they walk through these doors,” Nina answers. “I want them to see who we are and what we do.”

The same goes for their customers.

“We have a motto with our staff and that's, ‘smile or die,’ she says matter-of-fact. “We are in the hospitality business and you better put your smile on.”

These idiosyncrasies, the seemingly small details that make all the

difference and make the Hendees THE Hendees and THE Taste of Texas aren't just fluff. They're backed with science, proven by customers and sales.

"You're twice as likely to make an impression on someone if you make eye contact and smile," Nina says, "and you have four seconds to make that impression."

They're living proof.

So let it be known the flaming-hair gal was fine. A quick trip to the ladies' room sent her back out to her seat and gave the Hendees a story to tell.

Even more interesting than these fiery tales — like the one about a sweet 90-year-old who "literally died" and returned months later to declare, "I came to finish my steak" — is the Hendees' own. Dressed with its cast of characters and pivotal moments, it's the story of two broke kids, determined to get it right, who did.

## Running parallel

It was a birthday or some important date 35 years ago, Edd doesn't quite recall. What he does remember is his wife requested something special — a steak. With three kids in tow, he wondered where he could take his family and still have a great meal, so they traveled to a well-known joint.

"It was one of the worst meals I've ever put in my mouth," Edd says. "Not to mention the service was ghastly."

Their Taste [1977] already open and fighting for air, "I left there thinking, 'darn it, there have to be more people like me in the world that want to take their family out for a nice dinner.'"

His mind went to work.

It didn't have to be a white tablecloth spot with the hour reservations and a valet out front. No, this could be a place where you could bring the whole family, take your kids out to celebrate your wife's birthday and leave satisfied and full.



Travelers from all over the world and neighbors just down the street come to the Taste of Texas for a variety of occasions. It's the quality and service that bring them back.

"That's when I said, 'gosh, that may just be our niche.'"

Seven years prior and 1,200 miles northeast of town, a group of Angus ranchers had been looking for their own way to stand alone. A similarly bad steak experience and the knowledge of genetically superior marbling in Angus cattle led to the birth of the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand in 1978. An early adopter, confident in the product, a Houston distributor encouraged the struggling Hendees to try it.

"I think we were one of the first ones to sign on to the brand," Edd recalls. "I believe it was typed on a typewriter. An IBM Selectric typewriter. Now CAB is worldwide. I mean, it's intergalactic! So where do we still fit in?"

To be fair, the Hendees don't. Everything about them stands out.

Edd and Nina are a force. As individuals, they come bearing God-given traits and hard lessons learned that they apply to the people and the products they serve; but together is a whole other story. They were made for each other.

As for the restaurant, Houston's

mega scene, or "The Taste" as the regulars who work and dine there refer to it, is epic in scale and reach. The largest independent restaurant by sales volume in the state, #40 in the country, 1,000 meals come out of her kitchen each day while others are shipped across the United States.

As far as the CAB brand goes, no independent restaurant has sold more than them.

"Nobody comes close to us," Edd says with pride. For 35 years he and Nina held true to that typed agreement and have exclusively sold what's now the largest brand of beef — more than 6 million pounds (lb.) of it — and counting.

For numbers' sake, that equals about 9.5 million packer lb. — because The Taste purchases portion cuts they'll age for 40 days and offer customers individual selection.

"That's about 95,000 CAB-certified cattle that have been consumed at our place," Edd says.

That's the production of nearly one packing plant for an entire year.

"CAB came along about the time we realized there was a niche for high-quality dining for a casual

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moment,” Edd says. “When we found it, we realized that this was probably the best product we could ever offer our customer.”

But the brand did more than boost sales and offer marketing expertise.

“CAB changed the dynamic of this place,” Nina says. Everything and everyone had to step up their game. We went from mediocrity to excellence in all that we did.”

They bake their own breads, make their own salads and desserts. They listen to what the customers want, “because, without them, we’re done.”

“I never learned anything from sitting in a swivel chair,” Edd says. He’s in the kitchen, out front, greeting guests, listening and then listening some more. After all, a competitor down the street could also sell CAB.

“Our customers may not know why they love the Taste of Texas, or the details of it, but they know there’s an excellence here and that creates value for them.”

The menu is translated into 13 languages, coffee is sourced from an independent company whose owner’s grandfather did business with Edd’s dad. There’s a 45-second wait time from seating to hearing, “Hi, what can I offer you to drink this evening?”

## One and only

But the people come casual. In blue jeans and dresses, there’s something for everybody and room for all.

To see The Taste in action is to watch a cast ready for opening night. Confident, well-rehearsed, it all seems natural: the posture, the smiles, the service. Some restaurants are said to present as “organized chaos” but The Taste is almost quiet. It’s warm and relaxing.

Thirty-five years with the brand and all the teachings since, “We figured out we’ve got to specialize,” Edd says. “We can’t be everything to everybody. We’ve got to be something special to somebody.”

That’s why you’ll hear no talk of

franchising. Edd and Nina made that decision years ago and they’re people who stick by their word.

“I have one rule,” Edd says. “One wife, one restaurant. Two of either of them could cause a lot of problems.”

They laugh, but it’s deeper than that. It’s being rooted in a community, raising a family in the same spot, seeing staff every day, calling a place home. Edd wakes at 5 a.m. to lift weights with guys from the kitchen. Nina plans girls’ trips. They’ll mentor and support and listen.

A majority of college students and young staffers, 15,000 young people have worked The Taste in its 40 years. Fifty-two couples have met and married.

“We get some amazing people that grow up and come back and say, ‘I had no idea when I worked here, what I was learning, but I realize now that it set me up for success in my life.’

“That’s as good of a grade as I’m going to get in this world,” Edd says.

So where does one go from the

## Success in failure

Life has in no way come easy for Edd and Nina Hendee.

Young and in love, they met working at a Texas restaurant in the ‘70s and then decided to open one of their own at 26 and 23 years old.

Along with the CAB brand, the Taste of Texas has also celebrated 40 years.

“I didn’t think I was going to make it 40 days when I started,” Edd says.

The truth is, they were fumbling.

“We really struggled,” Nina says.

A staff of eight and a few customers in sight, “We were trying to be too many things to too many people. Too many pages of mediocrity” that left them broke.

Edd mowed lawns and Nina cleaned houses as the couple grew from failure.

“I think we learned everything from failing,” Nina says. “You don’t just give up. You find a way through the trial. We knew what it felt like to fail, so it also defined us in the success.”

There have been other hurts, pains far greater than money lost, but it’s God, Nina says, who brought them through.

“We have a cornerstone on the outside of our building that says, ‘To God, who is able to do immeasurably more than we can ever ask or imagine, to God be the glory.’”



top? In 2016 and 2017, The Taste grossed more than \$17 million in sales. They go through eight gallons of sweet tea per hour.

A 2018 expansion allowed for a bigger kitchen, more seats and a gift shop where folks can purchase pre-cooked and holiday meals.

"I tell our staff one of the biggest assets that we have, is we're a high-volume, very busy restaurant. One of the worst challenges we have, is we're a high-volume, very busy restaurant," Edd says.

Every customer is critical. Each moment should be celebrated.

A family is going to come in for that same special dinner the Hendees wanted years ago. They moved heaven and earth to get there.

That short time spent at The Taste, "It's got to be something special, because they're going to walk out that door with an opinion of this restaurant," Edd says, "if it isn't excellent, we lose that sale later on."

It's the business of making memories, of taking care of customers and becoming a home place for them to return. Edd and Nina want that for their children and grandchildren, too.

That's the future.

To those cattlemen who pour their lives into creating the product they're serving, Edd says, "Thank you. Thank you very much."

The dependable beef they're generating is the key to our success, he says.

Also, get better at it, he says. "We're going to need more product going forward, and it's a competitive world. We darn sure, today, better be better than we were two years ago."

The point hits home. Anything

Hendee says is like that; his natural charisma guarantees it.

"We've been blessed," he says, even before receiving the news that the Taste of Texas was named CAB's 2018 Independent Restaurant of the Year.

"We're doing well here, and the great news is, Nina and I love doing this. This is what we choose to do."

"I don't really want to go fishing and I'm not any good at golf," Edd

says. "Our job going forward is to tell other restaurants about CAB; tell the producer as well. There really is a product here that makes a difference."

There are people, too. **AJ**



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