



# Domenico's at the Lake

Missouri resort-area mom-and-pop restaurant keeps stepping it up.

by Jayne Godfrey, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**A** little push from a friend and a lot of help from family can make a big difference in the restaurant business. When Tony Cicerelli and his new wife, Debbie, moved to Osage Beach, Mo., to open a restaurant a few months after they first met, there was a lot up in the air.

After 25 years of careful decisions mixed with the occasional quick move, Domenico's at the Lake of the Ozarks has become one of the premiere *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand steak houses in Missouri's resort areas. Guests come in to dine from next door or all across the country asking for their signature dish: all-you-can-eat charbroiled prime rib.

Domenico's started as an Italian restaurant, and Italian it will always be. Their two families were in that business in Saint Louis, and no doubt generations before across the sea. Debbie's Archobasso family has three other restaurants around Missouri.

"We wanted to go somewhere else, so we picked the lake where we had each vacationed before, but didn't know each

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**— Tony Cicerelli**



PHOTOS BY GEORGE DENNY

► In 1988, Tony Cicerelli and his new wife, Debbie, moved to Osage Beach, Mo., to open a restaurant. They chose a menu based on the areas of Italy their families once called home, adding more of a beef emphasis to fit local demand.

other then," Tony says. "I met her in January, and by May we drove down here, looked around, made a decision, closed on it in 30 days and then we were open."

That was in 1988. They chose a menu based on the areas of Italy their families once called home, and added more of a beef emphasis to fit local demand.

## Adding Angus

A few years later, Tony developed a friendship with Angus seedstock producer Alan Mead from north of the lake. Mead often came in to Domenico's to enjoy the food and chat with the owners. Having spent a few years in construction, the restaurateur

found time to help out on the farm from time to time.

It seemed Mead was always talking about CAB, Tony says today, "like he was always suggesting that."

Mead says, "Eating at his restaurant before was inconsistent. Sometimes I got a good steak; sometimes I got a bad steak. So, I recommended *Certified Angus Beef* and told him about the benefits of having a consistent product."

Of course, Tony knew that was the ideal, "but for a smaller kind of mom-and-pop operation, to go CAB was unheard of because it was on a higher scale."

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Nevertheless, Mead was persistent in suggesting how to make quality consistent.

"I had to get Alan off my back," Tony

jokes. Still, he admits surprise when he made that switch in 2000: "It was far superior to anything else we'd tried, so we just geared towards that. We cut our own steaks, we cut our own filets, and the

quality is there. We have been with it ever since."

As for the famous charbroiled prime rib, Debbie says that was born of necessity the first year Domenico's was open. They were already getting a name for "all you can eat"



►Of the decision to switch to CAB in 2000, Tony Cicerelli says, "It was far superior to anything else we'd tried, so we just geared towards that. We cut our own steaks, we cut our own filets, and the quality is there."



of the standard, roasted prime rib. Then, one night something changed. The overnight roaster quit working on a Friday — with hungry people waiting.

“I thought, ‘Oh, what are we going to do? We have to sell prime rib,’” Tony recalls. “Everyone was looking at me, and I just cut a piece of meat, put it on the grill and called it charbroiled, and that’s how it happened. When we got our oven fixed, we just stuck with it, and now that’s what people know us for.”

Domenico’s is perhaps the only restaurant in the world that sells the best all-you-can-eat charbroiled prime rib, but when you add the premium quality, there is no “perhaps.”

“People really thought I was crazy when I wanted *Certified Angus Beef*, but we did it, and that’s pretty much what we are known for now. Even cattle people are surprised,” Tony says. “That piece of meat is a good start, but we add to it from there, and that’s why people remember us.”

### Making the call

He remembers the deliberation and decision to go with the brand.

“When we came down here, everyone was just a neighborhood place, and we stepped it up. I was going out to the farm with Alan . . . and saying, ‘Why are these cattle so good?’ We talked about it, and I went to his sale,” Tony says.

Knowing the distributor Middendorf Meats of Saint Louis carried CAB, he arranged to try it and decided to convert.

“He switched products because he trusted me,” Mead says. “He knew that I had nothing to gain, and I was just trying to help his business.”

Tony reciprocated by catering for one of Mead’s Angus events last winter, even though they don’t offer the service as a rule.

“We brought the charbroiler out to the sale barn and cooked the prime rib on site that time,” he says. “I believe we got customers from that.”

The rancher is still a regular at the restaurant, where he’s part of the extended Italian family where Tony and Debbie’s son Jeff helps wait tables today. He says quality is a big part of the draw, too. “They’re perceived in the area as one of the best places to get a steak. It’s a destination that people want to go to eat at.”

“It’s not a big story,” Tony says, laughing. “We came down here and didn’t know what we were doing, and here we are 25 years later. It’s no marketing plan; it’s no college. It’s hard work, and we’re not great marketers — we just care for the people.”

PHOTO BY JAYNE GODFREY



► Left: Sometimes in parades, this Angus statuary outside Domenico’s reminds everyone of the famous prime rib. “You can’t get charbroiled CAB prime rib anywhere else,” Tony says.

**Editor’s Note:** Jayne Godfrey is the fall 2013 intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.