



# Good

## Sous chef steps up to lead charge in Nashville.

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

**T**here was no divine calling, no enduring photos of a toddler baking in his memaw's kitchen, chef hat atop his head. For Eric Zizka, the ascent to culinary captain was messy, jotted with football injuries and car crashes, dreams stolen and abandoned plans.

"You don't realize it until now," he says, "but every single place that you've ever worked teaches you something."

It's a sobering thought for the 38-year-old sports-junkie-turned-chef, and the lesson's more vivid in the wake of it all.

Growing up in Windham, Conn., his days were full of football, basketball, wrestling and soccer. Yet his folks begged a family friend to give the rambunctious teen a summer job.

"My parents said, 'Is there anything you can give him to do to take the energy out of this kid? 'Cause sports isn't doing it.'"

Soon, the high school freshman's Monday and Tuesday nights found him arms deep in dishes. Revisiting the introduction to his life's passion, Zizka's eyes still ignite.

"We'd head home out the back, and I'd see the guys cooking on the line. I always admired them," he says.

The impression was immediate; the outcome was more of an accident.

"I thought, 'Wow, these guys are real men, you know?' They smoked cigarettes. They drank after work. It was just what you did back then."

As executive chef of Nashville's new Oak Steakhouse, there's no time for any of that now. Zizka wakes up each morning and heads to the heart of Music City's business district and the latest addition to The Indigo Road Restaurant Group. At 801 Clark Place, he's in charge; no dishes to wash.

That's not to say Zizka hasn't paid his dues. In fact, after a decade of working in the back of the house and the front, the kid from Connecticut has been on the Indigo Road team since 2013, first as renowned Chef Jeremiah Bacon's right hand at the Oak's flagship restaurant in Charleston, S.C.

"There was something special going on with that group, and I knew that," he says, recalling an arduous interview process. "I enjoyed every single day of going to work."

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# Interruptions

The idea that he was making money and having fun in the process made him want to stick around when many chefs with Zizka's experience would have left to pursue the main gig.

"I think I blinked and two years had passed," he says.

Just about that time, owner Steve Palmer rang.

## Transplanting Oaks

"He said: 'The chef down there could really use your help. Would you be willing to help the company out and go to Atlanta?'"

Zizka wrestled with the desire for greater responsibility, weighed against the idea of leaving the seaside town and the familiarity of Charleston's Oak.

"Without hesitating, my wife, Jamie, said, 'I'll follow you anywhere. Let's go.'"

So they went. For 18 months, he honed his craft and built the culture to mirror what was happening in Charleston.

Still, the chef wanted more. Palmer told him that would come with time.

Nashville wasn't in the plans.

The idea was to head to Charlotte, N.C., but when that got sidelined, Music Row called. A group of investors had built a hotel downtown and wanted the Oak as its casual, fine-dining fixture.

"It was the right time, the right place, the right people to be involved with and so, you know, Steve shook their hand, signed a deal, and here we are in Nashville," Zizka explains.

If only things could be that simple. Instead, construction woes pushed the start date back 11 months, leaving the chef without a kitchen or guests to feed.

"It happens," Zizka says. "It wasn't a human error." His calm demeanor on display, he points out the silver lining.

"Typically a chef will go into a new restaurant two or three weeks before it opens. The construction team hands you the keys and says, 'Let us know what needs to be fixed.' Sometimes it's too late and you just have to deal with it."

That's where the delay turned out just right.

"I'd been at the construction site every day," Zizka says. Climbing over piles of cement to dodge scaffolding, he knew his way around the mess.

"I was there so I could say, 'Hey, would you mind putting a hole in the wall here, more outlets over there.' So it's been good from the



standpoint that I knew this restaurant would open correctly."

In June, it did — with a chef who knows the ins and outs of more than the menu or the name on the sign out front.

"People come out to eat for all kinds of reasons," Zizka says. "To celebrate life, happiness — we want to make sure we're giving them the most pleasurable experience we can."

The food guarantees just that, he says.

## Quality experience

"It has everything to do with the *Certified*

*Angus Beef*® brand (CAB®)," Zizka says. "The marbling, texture, flavor and richness — the beef is in a class by itself."

If it weren't, the chef would tell you.

"We've tried and tested consistently. The best thing about CAB is that, as a chef, the only thing I need to do is cook it properly. The beef speaks for itself."

Zizka credits the ranchers for making it that way.

"It's more than a brand. The final outcome, the reason it tastes good, it all goes back to the ranchers and how they're raising their cattle," he says.

"The love and care that goes into the cattle is the same love and care we want to show our guests."

They do.

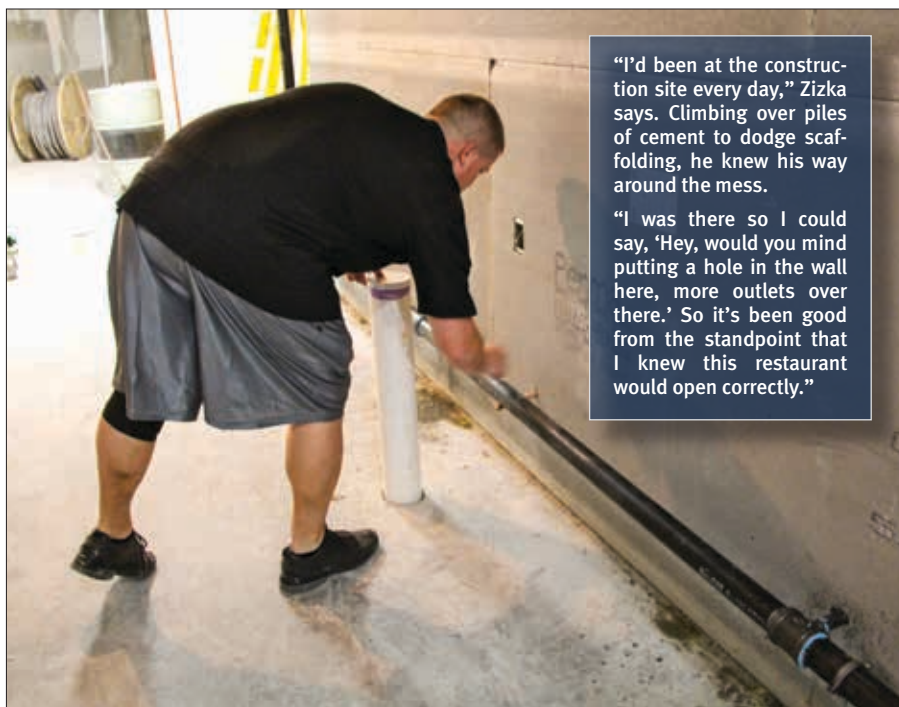
If there's a common theme for Zizka, it's those interruptions, the hiccups, the last-minute changes that have brought on the big moments for the Connecticut sportsman and now Nashville chef.

There's no divine calling yet, but a few pictures of him in the kitchen now endure.

There's still no hat, but a chef coat fits Zizka just fine.

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**Editor's Note:** Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



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