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Trading

Part 3: North Dakota rancher, restaurateur and chefs take a turn at each other’s role.

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

You have to think on the bright side,” Chad Ellingson says of the darker days that come to all who declare ranching their lifeblood. “If you’re having a bad one, just think of the steak dinner someone else is having. The great eating experience — hopefully you’re a part of that.”

It’s a Wednesday afternoon in Bismarck, N.D., and the sprawling windows of Peacock Alley American Grill & Bar let in just enough natural light to eliminate the need for artificial. Presidential portraits tower above, bringing to life characters from long ago who once found solace within these now-restaurant walls.

There below hangs an ode to another ancestry of equal importance: the cowboy hat.

Modest, like most of its wearers, but independent and mighty, it, too, represents days of old. Light falls on its brim, at once declaring its presence and demanding attention, if only for today. With a quick and familiar motion, Ellingson grabs it from the bronze railing and in a flash it’s atop his head and through the kitchen’s swinging doors.

At 40 Steak & Seafood, Chef Alan takes it a step further by bringing Ellingson into the dry-age cooler to cut, later season and eventually grill the steaks.



Places

On the ranch

“Just wait until I get you in my house,” Dale Zimmerman had teased just a few hours before. Secure within the confines of Ellingson’s Chevy 3500, Zimmerman and his restaurants’ executive chefs, Dusty Swenningson of the Peacock and Alan Abryzo of 40 Steak & Seafood peered out the window, riveted on the rancher’s every word. The men whose domain is flavor and texture looked upon the world where taste begins.

Then Ellingson beckoned them outside the truck.

“Here?” someone asked, followed by a brief hesitation. Wide-eyed, they stood in North Dakota’s tall summer grasses, staring at one of the Angus bulls. Masculine and stout, the 3-year-old paid no mind to the company who marveled at his stature, content to graze and rest in the shade on the family’s Saint Anthony land.

It was trust that got them to open the doors and trust led them behind Ellingson as they approached the beast. Eyes locked, stares held . . . and then came the smiles.

“This was my first time getting to see the beginning of what I love to do, which is cooking,” Abryzo says. “What I saw and heard today makes me more excited to continue my passion.”

In the kitchen

Well beyond a word, passion is one of many similarities chefs and ranchers share. Of course it may present itself in different

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ways, but when it comes to matters of long hours and late nights, traditions and legacy, commitment and follow-through, these guys speak the same language.

“People may get caught up on the price of beef, but you come out and see the process and you understand that, above everything else, the effort and time put into it is superior,” Swenningson says. “As a chef, you get a real appreciation for what you’re doing and the food you’re cooking.”

A mere 23 miles is all that stands between the bookends of beef’s entire story, and yet it’s rare for these teammates to come together. Sure, there’s the occasional dinner the Ellingson gang takes advantage of when in town or a ranch tour Zimmerman and Chef Dusty took last fall. Otherwise, the two sides shoulder their own responsibilities with precision and pride, confident that the other and everyone else in between will carry their own allotted weight when it comes their time to rise.

“I don’t think most consumers realize what we do here on the ranch to produce genetics that enhance their eating experience in the restaurant,” Ellingson says. Generations into the ranching gig, he does his best to speak out when time allows him off the homestead that welcomes anyone to visit. Alongside wife Julie, they’re raising five young people to spread the word, but it’s Zimmerman’s crew who has the platform each night.

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“To come out and see all that happens before it gets to my place, the care and the steps, it makes you proud.”

The same could be said of the apron wearers. From dirt to dishes, it’s a rather equal exchange for the North Dakota cowboy. Zimmerman brought Ellingson to the Peacock first. The daring restaurateur isn’t one to baby new recruits, especially one that brought him within feet of a bull well beyond his weight class. Plus, like Ellingson earlier in the day, Zimmerman wants the rancher to get a feel for what life is really like in his world.

“Look out. Watch your head!” The warnings come from behind the kitchen counter as patrons settle into their seats.

As orders fly in, it’s a learn-as-you-go atmosphere, but Ellingson’s tough enough to take it. With fresh *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) product, Chef Dusty offers a tutorial in grilling for the masses and reaching each customer’s desired degree of doneness. At 40, Chef Alan takes it a step further by bringing Ellingson into the dry-age cooler to cut, later season and eventually grill the steaks.

“It’s just like ranching,” Ellingson says, “very labor intensive. These guys put in a lot of sweat and long, hard hours, too.”

Yet for all the lessons learned behind the counter, those lived out in the front of the house remain the most dear. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the dinner crowds, the cowboy hat stands like a beacon in the storm, and people take notice. Whether his grin comes from confidence or gratitude, diners watch as he approaches their table, perhaps hoping it’s their plate he holds.

From there, Ellingson is in the game. Answering questions, dispelling rumors — it’s enough to suggest he take a second job, if only he had the time. For the customers, it’s a rare chance to connect to a world that’s right outside of town — one that keeps them in mind each day.

“You can see it in their eyes,” he says as he leaves a dinner party of 15. “You set it down in front of them and watch them take their first bite and you know it’s a good experience.”

Ellingson’s only a part of it all, and that suits him just fine.

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



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