

What a Chef Wants: Terms of His Own

California chef rises through the ranks, ends up a TV personality.

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

‘You’re done.”

It was no use pleading or cursing. The funny guy’s audition was shot, and with it went the dream of dimly lit comedy clubs full of cigars and uncontrollable belly laughs.

Michael Midgley hung up the phone, dropped his head and went back to his mark on the prep line at Chili’s. After all, he’d missed that big audition for the same reason: No one would cover his shift, and to bail now would go against the way he was raised.

“I was just brought up to not do that type of stuff,” he says. “My first obligation was Chili’s — and to not be homeless.”

If the scolding voice on the other end of the line knew then what is true today, his words would have fallen empty; but at 19, the boy from Stockton, Calif., was young and impressionable.

At 38, there’s still a baby face beneath the scruff and raspy voice of the trained chef and father to three. Impressions, though, are his to make.

“I’d reach for things and people would always tell me I wasn’t ready, or I didn’t have enough experience.”

Dating the pretty hostess at Applebee’s, playing high school football, “You’re not big enough. You aren’t fast enough.” The list goes on.

“My mentality was ‘I’m Mike Midgley and my dad told me I could get whatever I want in this world,’” he explains.

He married Laci in 2005. Before that, he was captain of the football team.

As a child, Midgley’s parents’ busy



► **Above:** “I wasn’t trying to get famous,” he says. “I wasn’t trying to be a celebrity. I wanted to be a chef.” A chef he is. With each TV role, Midgley showcases food the way he does his unique persona — in the raw, no facades.

schedules left time for Mike and older brother Chad to adventure in the kitchen.

“Sundays we would always have huge family meals,” he says. “We’d kind of potluck it. There’d be barbecue, lots of beef, steak and potatoes.”

Making a career

The high schooler with a strong work ethic caught the attention of a country club chef who pulled the kid aside and told him, “You’re going to be a chef of your own one day.”

“He just said, ‘I can tell you have it, dude. I see people in my kitchen all the time.’ It got me hungry thinking it could be a career.”

With the comedian goal still fresh, the idea of chef was thrown into the mix. “I totally took it seriously. I busbed. I bar-backed. I washed dishes. I mean, I mastered every position at the restaurant.”

When college proved “boring” and that audition went sour, Midgley decided to



commit to the kitchen full time.

“I went to the California Culinary Academy and just got straight As. I submerged myself. I lived in a dorm across the street and didn’t want to ever leave. After that, I bought a bar.”

That bar left the hustler wanting more from the kitchen, and after a brief stint as line cook at a nearby eatery, an overheard conversation set in motion his life’s trajectory.

“They were talking about this show on Bravo called *Top Chef*, so I pulled it up and started yelling at the TV.” A few days later he was at an audition in San Francisco.





Four hours early, with a 30-page application in hand, there was no surprise that the producers didn't even open the application. He got the gig.

"It totally changed my life," he says.

From there, the years became a blur: a restaurant group in Lake Tahoe; executive chef at an upscale retirement home and later at a casino; staggered with appearances on *Cutthroat Kitchen*, *Knife Fight*, *Top Chef Masters* and *Restaurant Startup*.

"I wasn't trying to get famous," he says. "I wasn't trying to be a celebrity. I wanted to be a chef."

A chef he is. With each TV role, Midgley showcases food the way he does his unique persona — in the raw, no facades.

He feels the most pride in providing for his wife and kids — and when he turns a vegan on to meat.

"I'll take a piece of *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) prime rib and slice it up for Happy Hour. They'll say, 'I don't eat meat. Okay, maybe I'll just take a little bite.' Nobody was born a vegan. We've got pointy teeth."

Midgley's Public House is to Stockton what its owner is to customers: approachable and fun, with a flare for elegance. Scan the rustic décor and you'll see wooden beef cuts and a coat of arms, the menu and that CAB logo, each item as intentional as the next.

In fact, the chef set up blind tests to see if the brand held up to its quality reputation.

"I did with my distributor, with my investors and my friends. I did

it here with employees against, like, tons of high-end meat. It won every time," he says.

"It's the consistency in size, the flavor, the brand recognition. I just fell in love with the whole CAB program."

A recent trip to a Nebraska Angus ranch provided perspective for the Hollywood chef.

"I see why it's consistent. The steps producers take, it's really hard work."

The words come from a man who knows the meaning.



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



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