



World Class in Tulsa

Chef Bill Tackett's early taste of the business finally led to Bluestone Steakhouse & Seafood.

by Katie Alexander, Certified Angus Beef LLC

That ranch or restaurant seems to have everything figured out. You can't think of anything they could do better, but can you imagine what it took to get there?

Some are carrying on a long tradition of excellence. Others represent the first chance to shine after decades of saving, sacrificing and planning so they could arrive at today's success.

Chef Bill Tackett and wife Sharon of Tulsa, Okla., took that hard road. A dream delayed 30 years, they bought Bluestone Steakhouse & Seafood in 2014 in hopes of making it exceptional.

As a young teen starting in junior high, the future restaurateur worked in kitchens



for talented, classically trained chefs, and he always saved half his wages. Then it was on to culinary school, but not far away. That department at Oklahoma State University included a focus on animal physiology.

"We were breaking down five different kinds on the chain, into all of their component parts so we knew how to use everything," Tackett recalls. "Listen, you might have the wrong guy here for a chef feature — maybe you should find somebody

who wanted to be a chef since he was in the cradle or something. I'm more of a businessman."

He still felt the call of the kitchen, but with a young family at home, the new graduate and fully trained chef did not see a way to pay the bills along that route. The day would come.

"All the chef shows on TV now where the savvy contestant is able to break out in two hours and get a contract, that's not how the

real culinary world works,” Tackett says. “In the cities, most of the young chefs have to work three jobs, 18 to 20 hours a day to pay the rent.”

Instead, he went into oilfield equipment and truck sales for several years before settling into a job that fit his education. As protein specialist for distributor US Foods in Oklahoma City, Tackett built up a successful career based on his penchant for quality.

That led him and the distributor to partner with the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. Science and economics made the case for quality and the leading beef brand, across many years of cutting demonstrations and business advice.

“I would consult restaurants on their operations in the accounting and on their food, whatever the case may be,” Tackett says. “I could walk in and within two hours tell what your problems are.”

That sometimes meant delivering bad news, including that the restaurant was losing enough money the owners should close it down, he notes. “Don’t fool yourself or lose the rest of your life savings.”

Seeing a lot of successful chefs and concepts in addition to the failures through the years, Tackett grew more confident in his ability to stay in the black. After their children were raised and had kids of their own, the couple bought into the steak-house dream.

“I’d been in the restaurant business all my life, one way or another. My goal at Bluestone is to epitomize the best of the best, from the wines to our food,” he says. “We make everything at the bar from scratch. We create all of our own mixers.”

Not ashamed of the price

The college lessons in carcass and cut utilization come into play when buying and

creating dishes from high-quality ingredients that do cost more.

“My fundamentals are that you discover the right product, finish it and don’t be ashamed of the prices,” Tackett says. “If I did it the best then there are people that will pay for it.”

He keeps prices reasonable for the value received as each item earns its way onto the menu. To achieve that, he breaks down every beef cut and seafood item to use in stock and sauces that do not go into main dishes.

That’s why he features CAB steaks at Bluestone, having converted the previous owner because of the quality.

Tackett remains very “hands-on” in his restaurant. He fabricates the beef for his *chef de cuisine*, oversees the dishes going out and updates the reserve wine list.

What sets Tackett apart from other chefs is his combination of science training and business experience in addition to the cuisine and culinary arts.

“I know how to sell value parts of the tenderloin to increase my yield and profitability,” he says. “I watch our costs. I don’t have that many people, but I have skilled people in all of my positions, and I pay them for that.”

Noting he has friends who prefer to market tenderloins from “ungradable cows” just to keep prices low, Tackett says he’d rather not live in fear of losing volume.

“I’ll serve quality and charge more,” he says. “It takes time for quality to be known, sometimes five to seven years, and you have to be willing and able to wait that out.”

Tackett says he shares that patience and dedication with ranchers who chart a course toward better genetics: “They wait for the next generation and then the next generation of cows to produce calves that can go CAB and Prime, that earn another \$30 or \$40 per hundredweight.”

Patience pays

The waiting game seems to be working out for Bluestone Steakhouse & Seafood, though guests don’t often have to wait for seating. The ambiance includes live music almost every night, and “it’s a great date-night place, because you can hear yourself talk — even with the music — because the acoustics are perfect.”

It is growing in popularity, though Tackett says only 20% are weekly regulars. Most people don’t go out for the celebratory meal or that level of budget expense so often. However, there are more and more believers.

“A restaurant is like a church,” he says. “If the food isn’t properly prepared, the people are not going to come back. If the music and the ambiance aren’t right, they are not going to feel good and they are not coming back. If the greeters and ushers and the service isn’t good, they are not going to come back. The restaurant is a symphony of those three things.”

Tackett integrates that in a cozy restaurant that takes you out of the real world.

“It is a kind of a place in time,” he says. “You walk through the doors and you know you’re somewhere really nice and secluded, and it’s like you’re in a little hideaway to have refuge from the wild days of the world that we live in today.”

You don’t need your Sunday best to stop in for dinner, however. There is no dress code, and everyone is invited to come in, Tackett says. “You can just be comfortable in your own skin here.”

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Editor’s Note: Katie Alexander is an intern for *Certified Angus Beef LLC*.

