

Trophy Beef

Now all roads lead to the Wheeler Inn.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

Between Kansas City and Omaha, there is at least one good reason to stray from the beaten path that is Interstate 29. On the west side of the Missouri River lies the farm town of Auburn, Neb., and its latest claim to fame, the Wheeler Inn.

It's not a new place. But the proprietor, Dennis Wheeler, is the reigning Nebraska Restaurateur of the Year. All through 2001 while the traveling trophy rested inside, construction proceeded outside on U.S. Highway 75. Customers are happy to have blacktop again, but nothing could have kept them away — not even winter's lumpy paths.

"We had 14 months of construction," Wheeler says. "We were starting to get normal traffic back by Thanksgiving, but we had people fighting their way into the place when all we had was a dirt road."

Career start

Wheeler is something of an institution in Auburn, having grown up on a farm south of there and graduated high school at age 16. He worked at an Omaha packing house for a couple of years, saved money and came back to town to buy the ice cream store he had enjoyed visiting as a student.

"I thought it would be a good business," he recalls. "That started my restaurant career. I bought the Dairy Queen franchise for several counties and ran the store in Auburn for four years before selling it for twice what I had paid for it." He was 22 years old then, and had opportunity to buy and sell that store three times since; now remodeled, it serves as a meeting hall with catering available from the Wheeler Inn.

"Growing up, we had champion Angus cattle at the county and even state fair. I enjoyed that growing up, but I didn't want to do it, didn't want to farm," he says. "I got out in the business world, and since my stint in the packing house, I've never worked for anybody, just for myself."

Business suited Wheeler well. By the time he was 45, he and wife Carol had five businesses in Auburn: a steak house, fast-food restaurants, an antique shop, real estate sales and appraisals and a convenience store.

"One day about that time in my life, I just felt tired," he says. "We had both worked seven days a week for many years, so we decided to sell the businesses on contract and retire."

One of the most challenging headaches the restaurateur had faced after converting the present Wheeler Inn from fast food to steak house in 1973 was the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grading change in 1976.

"Suddenly grading wasn't like it used to be," he recalls. "One week it was good, the next week it was a problem. Tonight you'd serve a New York strip that was excellent, tomorrow night you'd get into one that was tough and stringy. The problem didn't get better."

Fed up, the Wheelers were more content wintering in Florida and traveling around for a decade, while maintaining a permanent home in Auburn, where Carol founded a world-class pet shelter and adoption agency.

Unexpectedly, after a 10-year holiday from grading worries, Wheeler found himself back at the inn. "The kid who was buying it filed bankruptcy and walked out, and there was no reason for that," he says. "All that time I had missed the place a bunch; it had really been my favorite."

In search of consistency

Reviving dormant management skills, he was glad to find they were still there. Unfortunately, the same inconsistent Choice beef was still there, too.

"When we would butcher something growing up, it was always the best Angus beef, but I didn't think we would ever find it like that again," he recalls. "Then one day a guy came in who had been down in the Branson, Mo., area. He ordered our prime

► Above: Dennis Wheeler says he doesn't know who nominated him for Nebraska Restaurateur of the Year. However, he says he appreciates the award because it's based on everything he aspires to: "Hospitality, the quality of the place, the food, the people, the manager."

rib and when I brought it out, he pulled out this steak pick that said *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) and put it in the meat to show me the way it was displayed in a Missouri restaurant.

“He said if I wanted to sell the best, I should find out where to get this brand — which I had not heard of at the time.” So Wheeler asked around and found he could get the product in Omaha. That was five years ago.

“When we first tried CAB there was so much difference over Choice, we couldn’t believe it — strip, filet or prime rib, you didn’t need a knife, only a fork. It was not like other meats,” he recalls. Wheeler promptly licensed and let word get around that on top of great service, he now featured the best beef.

“We sell out of prime rib every night now, though we cook a lot of it. The quality of the food at reasonable prices, that’s why we do a lot of business,” Wheeler says. People come to Auburn from Omaha and Lincoln, and from Saint Joseph, Mo., and all the farm towns in between on both sides of the Missouri River just to eat at the Wheeler Inn.

“We’re known all over for that prime rib,” Wheeler says. “I go to every table at least once or twice to see if everything’s OK, and I never get any complaints. CAB makes my job so easy. And the business rolls in. On a weeknight, in a town of 3,500, you couldn’t pry another person into our lounge and dining room that seats 250. And we’ll have a group of 70 or more over in the banquet room. It’s just done wonders for our business.”

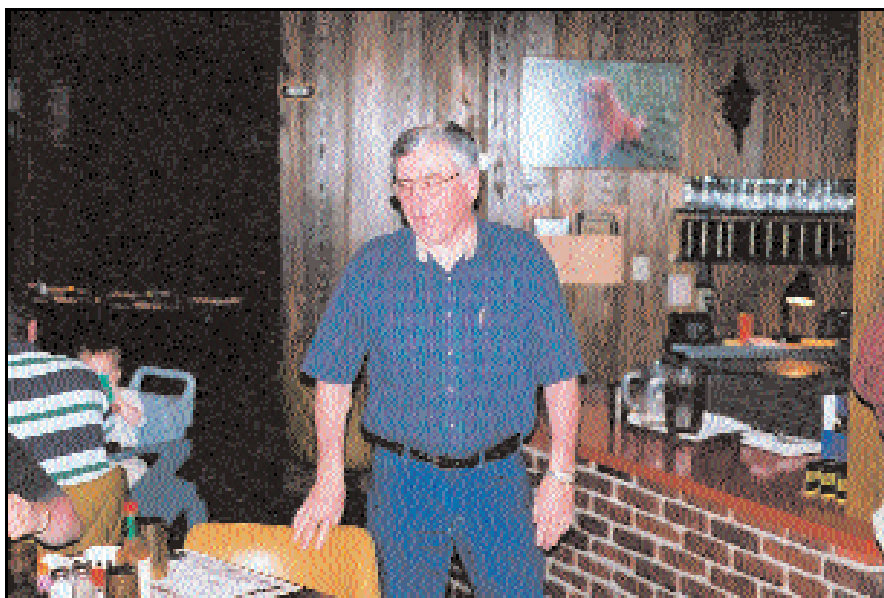
He singles out one key ingredient besides CAB: “We have an outstanding chef who deserves a lot of credit, who’s been with me six years and never missed a day’s work. The best chef in this part of the country,” Wheeler says of Phoenix native Dennis Schroeder.

A winner

With everything coming up aces, Wheeler was still surprised when the Nebraska Restaurant Association advised him to be on hand for last April’s awards banquet.

“To get up in front of 1,000 people was new and different for me, and sitting at the head table with my wife and our people, the president of the association, the governor and his wife,” he says.

Wheeler doesn’t know who nominated him for Nebraska Restaurateur of the Year but he appreciates the award because it’s based on everything he aspires to: “Hospitality, the quality of the place, the food, the people, the manager — everything it takes to have a nice place.



► “I go to every table at least once or twice to see if everything’s OK, and I never get any complaints,” says Wheeler Inn restaurant owner Dennis Wheeler. “CAB makes my job so easy.”

“It helped my business, too,” says the manager of a restaurant that was facing construction obstacles. “That trophy sitting out there has everybody talking. Groups will come in, and their leaders will stand up and point it out and everybody applauds. It has really been the highlight of my career.”

The traveling trophy dates back 40 years, but usually goes to “bigger places in the limelight in Omaha, Lincoln or Grand Island.” This April, Wheeler will pass the trophy along to the next honoree while accepting a smaller one for permanent display.

No matter where the trophy finally rests, celebrations will continue at the Wheeler

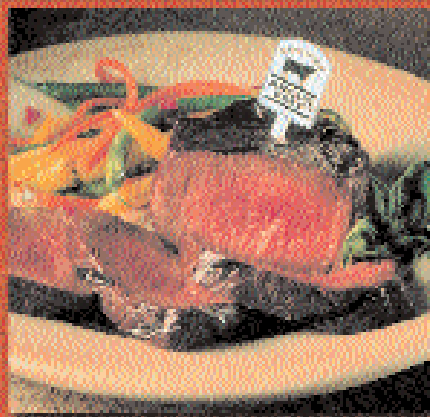
Inn. There’s room for 450, banquet hall included, so don’t worry if the parking lot looks full. This is the home of consistent excellence, a home that’s been added on to seven times but still retains a cozy atmosphere. Wheeler says he has the restaurant business figured out now, and from the looks of it, he does.

He’s stocking up on supplies. Added to a recent order for still more CAB prime rib from Harker’s Distribution Inc., Le Mars, Iowa, was a line item requesting another 10,000 CAB steak picks.



Table 1: Steak pick usage in boxes of 1,000, by year

Year	No. boxes
1989	595
1990	858
1991	647
1992	763
1993	1,302
1994	1,775
1995	1,620
1996	2,090
1997	3,612
1998	4,366
1999	5,621
2000	6,602
2001	5,948
Total	35,799



Certified Angus Beef[®] (CAB[®]) steak pick usage dates back at least to 1986, but inventory movement has been tracked on computer records since 1989. It is estimated 36-40 million steak picks have graced CAB steaks since the program began.