

# Buckhorn



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN PICKEREL

## A California restaurateur discovers CAB® is the only beef to serve.

by **Stephanie Veldman**

**K**nown as California's cut, the beef tri-tip is one of three muscles found in the bottom-sirloin, and it has become one of the most versatile beef cuts in the state. John Pickerel, owner of Buckhorn Steak & Roadhouse, Buckhorn Grill and Buckhorn Catering says the tri-tip is his favorite cut. He's the largest buyer of *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) tri-tips in the country.

Pickerel says he purchased more than 200,000 pounds (lb.) of CAB tri-tips in 2001 for his two restaurants and catering business. In 2003 he estimates he will buy more than 400,000 lb. of tri-tips. The first Buckhorn Grill was opened in San Francisco, Calif. There are now four locations in California. Buckhorn Steak & Roadhouse and Buckhorn Catering are located in Winters, Calif.

When asked why he likes the tri-tip cut so much, Pickerel says, "I am in an area that spends a lot of time breaking down the philosophy of taste — sweet, sour, bitter and salty. There are taste profiles for everything;

there are taste profiles for different parts of the cow.

"In my opinion, the flavor of tri-tip is dead center," he says. "It satisfies people's predetermined idea of what beef is."

### The beginning

Pickerel grew up in a world of buying and selling cattle. His father was an order buyer and yard manager at the stockyards in Spokane, Wash., where Pickerel worked odd jobs during high school and college.

Pickerel was introduced to the restaurant business by Pete Gillham, who owned Cattlemen's, a restaurant in Dixon, Calif. Pickerel had met Gillham while working at the stockyards. Pickerel started as a meat cutter and worked at the restaurant for six years before starting his own restaurant.

"I was very enamored with the idea of being in the steak-house business," Pickerel says. "We opened the Buckhorn Steak & Roadhouse in 1980, and we had some pretty good success, but then everyone started

going away from eating beef. It looked pretty grim for awhile."

Instead of giving up his steak house, Pickerel accepted an invitation to visit Monfort headquarters in Greeley, Colo. He was shown the feedlots and how the feed was made. He says this was really where he began to understand the quality of fed beef.

"This is what set me on the trail of looking for a quality beef like CAB. I was determined to distinguish myself in the steak-house business," Pickerel says. "I wanted to find the best meat. That is when I began to sell CAB."

His first CAB supplier was Facciola Meats Co. in Palo Alto, Calif.

### Why CAB?

Pickerel says his restaurant's main feature was the CAB top-sirloin steak. "I ended up selling 50 to 60 top sirloins a week, so I knew it was a good cut. I was then faced with the decision of switching to serving all *Certified Angus Beef* on my menu, which was significant because it costs more, so I would have to charge more."

His catering business was where most of his tri-tips were sold. As they started using more and more CAB products, the tri-tips became a signature item. "People really knew us for the tri-tip, and we weren't even serving it in the restaurant," Pickerel says.

His current wholesale meat supplier, Sierra Meat Co. in Reno, Nev., was influential in convincing Pickerel to become a fully-licensed *Certified Angus Beef* LLC (CAB) restaurant.

"We showed him some programs that CAB had — the advertising and menu options," says Mitch Mitchell, Sierra Meat CAB sales manager.

Mitchell adds that Pickerel is very independent when it comes to decisions for running his restaurant. "John hasn't used much of the marketing that is available to him through CAB. He has pretty much made his business successful on his own."

Pickerel says that he likes working with Sierra Meat because they help him find ways to succeed. "They share information, and they are honest. They will take the product back if it isn't right. It is just professionalism, integrity and good customer service."

He adds that he chose to use CAB product because the most motivating factor in a customer's decision to buy is value. "If

► **Above:** John Pickerel opened the Buckhorn Steak & Roadhouse in 1980. He says the most motivating factor in serving *Certified Angus Beef*® is the customer's decision to buy its value. "People need to feel like they have gotten their money's worth, and that is very relevant to CAB and to my business."

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anyone knows me, they know I am customer-driven," he explains. "People need to feel like they have gotten their money's worth, and that is very relevant to CAB and to my business."

## Buckhorn Grill

For several years, Buckhorn Steak & Roadhouse and the catering business were enough to keep Pickerel busy. In 1998 he partnered with Jim Apple, Orinda, Calif., who convinced Pickerel to expand into the fast-casual dining scene in the San Francisco area. They opened the Buckhorn Grill restaurant. Pickerel defined fast-casual dining as upscale fast food, where customers get quality food quicker than they would at a restaurant.

"We are taking a steak-house quality beef to a sandwich scenario," Pickerel says. "We can make a sandwich out of a tri-tip faster than a hamburger chain can make a hamburger, but it costs more. We sell speed, but we sell at a higher price."

The Buckhorn Grill was opened in the Sony Metreon complex in the heart of San Francisco. Pickerel says the Metreon complex was a controversial project during its construction. It is described as a 350,000-square-foot (sq. ft.) box that is very cutting edge.

"The owners of the Metreon wanted this project to have non-chain restaurants, but still represent the local dining scene in San Francisco," Pickerel says. "I had to really pitch to these guys that we were the right thing for their food court, which is known as the Taste of San Francisco. We were supposed to be the American version of the cuisine, which also featured Japanese, Mexican, Italian and Chinese."

Because this would have been the first Buckhorn Grill, Pickerel didn't have a restaurant where he could host the representatives, so he brought his cutting board and CAB tri-tips to a fifth-floor meeting room of Sony's headquarters, where the decision-makers were all gathered. He talked about the quality of the meat and flavor profiles, showed them U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grading cards and gave a cutting demonstration to show the tenderness and juiciness of the beef.

"The juice would cascade over the surface of the cut that I made, and as I put the meat on plates, I told the decision-makers they would have a burst of flavor on their palate



► The Buckhorn Steak & Roadhouse, located in Winters, Calif., is a fully-licensed CAB restaurant. "I wanted to find the best meat. That is why I began selling CAB," Pickerel says.

that would be indelible, and they would not be able to forget it," Pickerel says.

He wasn't offered the spot immediately, but he was asked to cater the tying-off party at the Metreon, when the last steel beam would be put in place.

"It was a big event, and we did it using the CAB tri-tip again. They all loved it," he says. "From there they offered us an opening for a restaurant in the Metreon."

It turned out to be a smart move for Sony. In a review that was published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, John King wrote, "Sony's smartest move at the Metreon was to lure established local restaurants such as Buckhorn Grill and Firewood. They are the

one thing that keeps nearby residents and workers coming back."

Pickerel says that business is strong at the Buckhorn Grill. In 2001 they sold about 50,000 tri-tip sandwiches. "We are now buying it by the truckload."

Pickerel says he plans to keep expanding locations for the Buckhorn Grill. Currently they have three operating in California. As for the Buckhorn Steak & Roadhouse, he says he invites everyone to California to visit the restaurant. "People come from all over to eat here, and I just want to continue to improve that awareness as being one unique restaurant and get people to drive out here."



## Angus members get a taste of California

Angus producers from across the United States were treated to a meal from Buckhorn Catering during the 2002 National Angus Conference and Tour in Sacramento, Calif. The California Angus Association sponsored the meal.



PHOTO BY STEPHANIE VEIDMAN

► John Pickerel (right), owner of Buckhorn Catering, says the *Certified Angus Beef*® tri-tip steaks have become his signature item. Pat Norris, Sierra Meat Co. CAB sales representative, is his CAB supplier.

Included in the meal were *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) tri-tip steaks, an undervalued cut from the bottom sirloin that has become popular in California.

"It is a 100% useable product. There isn't a lot of gristle in it, and not a lot of waste in it, but the outside fat is a little excessive," says John Pickerel, owner of Buckhorn Catering.

After the meal, Pickerel asked to say a few words to the attendees. He thanked them for the work put into creating a quality product like CAB. He also added that he was very honored to meet the people behind the product he sells.

"He was so excited about coming to that convention," says Mitch Mitchell, CAB sales manager for Sierra Meat Co. "He was really impressed with everything they had done."