

MOOve Over for MOOYAH

This young, fast-casual franchise is serious about being the best in the biz.

by Diane Meyer, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Success is all about finding an edge, something unique, pursued with passion.

Founded in 2007 in Plano, Texas, MOOYAH Burgers, Fries and Shakes set out to be the leader in service and food quality in the fast-casual restaurant scene from Day 1.

Their edge? A “Seriously Fun” mantra and business model with uncompromising standards.

“We encourage people to have fun in the restaurant,” says MOOYAH’s vice president of marketing, Natalie Anderson-Liu. “We have food you eat with your hands. We have chalkboard walls where people can literally go and make their mark. ... We’re serious about the food and service, but that’s about all.”

A hallmark of fast-casual restaurants is the added caliber of service and food not found in the fast-food sector. Original MOOYAH owners Rich Hicks and Todd Istre spent months perfecting the french fry, refusing to launch until the 24-hour, six-step process created the highest-quality fries.

Quality pairings

Perfect fries necessari-tater-ed a pairing with the perfect burger.

MOOYAH cooks are called “grill captains,” a commission earned only after extensive training in grill skills. To lead in the fast-casual scene, the company needed beef worthy of its grill captains and passion — something to make their edge



PHOTOS BY LAURA CONWAY

steeper, something that screamed quality. The solution?

Cue the cliffhanger.

“Many of our fast-food competitors are talking about Angus,” Anderson-Liu says. “It’s no longer good enough to offer Angus burgers — even fresh, never-frozen Angus burgers. It has to be higher than that to set us apart.”

A bit of market research soon pointed to one logical answer.

“We were so excited to partner with the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand because of what it stands for,” says Anderson-Liu. It builds on her company’s Seriously Fun mantra.

“The serious stands for our obsession with food quality,” she says. “*Certified Angus Beef* is the serious behind that [mantra]. It lends legitimacy to why we can say we are so focused on quality. That’s critically important, because we can’t have the fun without the serious.”

The partnership was only a year old when proven a standout, earning the 2017 Excellence in Marketing Award for a Newcomer at CAB’s annual conference last fall.

“It was one of the most successful launches in our history,” says Kelly Murray, CAB assistant director of foodservice marketing strategy.

“They have definitely taken ownership in the brand and that’s what we hope for in a partner.”

They sell a lot of beef, too. In one year, franchisees sold more than 1 million pounds of ground beef, more than 3 million burgers.

Story resonates

The leadership team at MOOYAH did not jump into selling the brand as a leap of faith. Meticulous preparation went into the launch, starting with a visit to CAB headquarters in Wooster, Ohio. Anderson-Liu and other MOOYAH executives toured the Culinary Center, learned about the 10 science-based quality standards, and developed a marketing plan right out of the gate to train their franchisees.

For Anderson-Liu, the trip was eye-opening.

“As I’ve had more exposure to the ranchers and their families, what has struck me the most is the heritage around ranching that I was never aware of,” she says. “The fact that over 95% of Angus beef is raised on family-owned ranches is such a cool fact.”

Beyond cool, it seriously resonates.

“It really is the heartbeat of America,” Anderson-Liu says. “It’s mothers and fathers, grandfathers, sons and daughters all working together, and they love their cattle. That’s incredibly powerful and emotional. That’s the story we’re telling in our restaurants, coupling

that with the science-based quality standards and the flavor they yield.”

The commitment ranchers have to their cattle is the same commitment MOOYAH’s chefs and grill captains have to their food, something to which Anderson-Liu knew customers could relate.

Science-backed

“It’s not arbitrary as to what makes it into the CAB brand,” she points out. “Those specifications are so scientific, and I realized, yes, consumers can really understand this. We’re not going to go into what the 10 specifications are in all marketing applications, but just the fact that there is rigor behind CAB is really important.”

The tagline, “Ranch raised, bar raised” exemplifies MOOYAH’s marketing ingenuity.

“Natalie knows what resonates with consumers,” Murray affirms. “She understands that if they know the product was raised by a family then it was humanely raised and cared for, and that the quality is there.”

Murray and MOOYAH’s marketing team co-hosted two 15-minute train-the-trainer webinars that gave general managers and franchisees an opportunity to learn about the CAB brand. Then, they were sent kits with instruction cards to help educate their restaurant staffs, and lapel pins to wear proudly on their uniform caps.

“MOOYAH has worked hard to share their quality focus with their guests and the ownership base,” says Sara Scott, CAB director of broadline foodservice. “They took time to thoroughly develop a launch strategy and rolled out the brand in a slow and methodical

way. This has contributed to their long-term success in promoting the brand.”

Many have noticed the stellar business operations. In 2015, *Franchiserankings.com* ranked MOOYAH second in Fast Casual, fourth in the broader Restaurant category and seventh among Overall Franchises. The chain was included in *Fast Casual Magazine’s* Top 100 Movers & Shakers list each year from 2012 to 2017, ranking No. 11 in 2017.

“I attribute the success to the passion and the work of our franchisees,” Anderson-Liu says. “They’re growing and leading their teams, providing that service, and providing the best burger, fries and shake experience ever, time and time again. That’s what grows the brand. Marketing complements what they do, but we wouldn’t be able to grow without their tireless commitment.”

The internal partnership between their strong marketing department and passionate franchisees fuels success. In just four years, the chain grew from 40 to more than 100 locations in 20 states and eight other countries.

Having outgrown its original headquarters, the company recently moved to another Plano location to provide a better environment for the MOO Crew Support Center, and to show interested prospects a better brand image.

“When new potential franchisees come in the door and they look at

the brand they might buy into, it’s very important that we show them the level of support they’re going to receive,” says Anderson-Liu.

A lot of thought goes into selecting the right locations. Paired with the instinct and experience of a successful marketing team, analytics pinpoint markets that have the targeted demographics. Everything down to a corner location in a shopping center is selected with good reason.

“We are looking to grow strategically and purposefully in the next 10 years,” Anderson-Liu says. “We are identifying markets that we want to fully saturate and grow in a smart way so we can fully support them. We are also open to international growth — international locations do very, very well.”

She pauses. “Really, the sky’s the limit for us.”

Rest assured, if MOOYAH decides to launch a location in outer space (MOON-YAH, perhaps?), the preparation and planning will be as rigorous as building a space station, with extra care to maintaining the effortlessly fun atmosphere.

“Working with MOOYAH is a lot of fun,” says Murray. “Those of us that work with them thoroughly enjoy them as people and partners. They’re just really good, good people that are fun, and care, and understand our brand.”

“It’s a universal feeling that when people eat out they want to have a great experience every single time,” Anderson-Liu adds. “It’s not enough that the food is good. They have to walk away feeling something, and we’re really good at providing that experience.” **AJ**



Editor’s Note: Diane Meyer is a producer communications intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.