

It's What?

A cattleman's guide to eating out

by Janet Mayer

Do restaurateurs cringe when they see you entering their establishments? Do waiters pray you won't be seated at one of their tables?

If you answer – yes, the odds are you are a self proclaimed, “beef expert,” otherwise known as a cattleman.

A cattleman is probably one of the most demanding and critical patrons a restaurant will ever serve. Since the cattleman is knowledgeable in almost all phases of the cattle industry, he has a proficiency in judging fine beef that could be envied by the most dedicated gastronomist. Any beef a cattleman orders in a restaurant had darn well better measure up to the beef he produces and consumes at his own dinner table, or he may become extremely unhappy.

As Angus breeders, my husband and son declare themselves to be “beef experts.” They claim they can tell the breed of beef they are eating by the color of the fat and the flavor. A usual topic of conversation when we dine out is what kind of beef they are eating.

Probably some of the most interesting and heated beef discussions have been while dining with cattlemen who raise other breeds. During cattle shows, we regularly dine with two Hereford breeders and their fitter. If the beef at these meals is particularly bad, everyone agrees that it has to be Charolais we are eating.

Not having been raised on a farm, I never gave the subject of the beef I was eating too much consideration. My family ate well-done meat in moderation, and if it was good, I would sometimes take seconds. But eating an entire steak by yourself was inconceivable, and occasionally we even had a meal minus meat.

I married into a dairy, beef, hog, poultry operation, so I became educated to the facts of meat production very quickly. Needless to say, my eating habits have been drastically altered. The No. 1 rule being: you must serve large amounts of well-cut meat at virtually every meal, and it must be cooked medium, never well-done.

Getting the well-cut meat is no problem, because my husband, who is quite an accomplished butcher, does all cutting and meat processing on the farm. Quite

the contrary, the major problem I encounter is getting him to make what I consider normal sized cuts of meat. His family always ate enormous cuts of meat, so it is not unusual to end up with steaks 2 1/2-inch thick and masts weighing five or six pounds.

The situation is compounded if he hasn't eaten before he begins to cut. The hungrier he is, the larger the cuts. I solve this problem by making sure he eats before he cuts and monitoring the cutting procedure.

Besides supplying our family with meat, our farm has various other markets

grand champion or reserve grand champion at numerous fairs throughout our state. While visiting with my son at college, we had occasion to eat in a restaurant of this particular chain. I noted the marquee was advertising 4-H Grand Champion Baby Beef, which I found to be odd since the 4-H sale had been held at least six weeks prior. After I had placed my order, I asked the girl if I would be eating 4H beef

“Oh yes,” she replied with a beaming smile.

“How many beef animals did your restaurant buy,” I asked.

“Just one, and it was the grand champion,” she proudly answered.

“It must have been some size beef animal to have lasted this long,” I said.

The smile quickly faded, and pretending she hadn't heard me, she began to take the order of the person behind me.

I wonder if that customer believed he was going to be eating 4-H beef.

Another thing I have noticed about this type of steak house is that they always ask you how you want your steak done. I don't know why they bother to ask. Chances are, it won't be as you ordered it. Most of their cuts are so thin, such as a steak sandwich or the smaller ribeyes, the only way it could possibly be served rare is to skip cooking it altogether.

I always order mine medium and hope for the best. I have gotten them in all degrees of doneness-from rare to something that resembles a black hockey puck.

And never send it back for further cooking, because everyone at the table will have finished 15 minutes before it is returned and are now ready to leave.

The best policy to follow in this type of steak house is: stick to the salad bar, or be hungry enough to accept a steak in any degree of doneness.

When my husband and I attend cattle shows, he, of course, gets hungry for beef, so we usually hunt up the nearest steak house. Last year after a large state show, we went to a steak house nearby that advertised prime grain-fed beef. I ordered a filet mignon, medium well. It literally



for our beef. Over the years, we have phased out the hogs, dairy, and poultry enterprises of the farm. At present we have a herd of registered Angus cattle and some crossbred commercial cattle. Selling steer calves to 4-H members for market steer projects has become a big part of our operation. In turn, my husband and I usually try to patronize the businesses and restaurants that support the 4H livestock sales.

Naturally, the people who buy the 4-H project animals try to get as much publicity as possible out of the fact they supported the 4-H sales, but some of them go too far.

One example is a well-known chain of steak houses, which usually buys the

mooded at me when the waiter served it, so I, of course, sent it back. Miraculously, it reappeared in about 10 minutes, but I never did figure out how they cooked it the second time around; it tasted like it had been done over a fire made of old rubber tires in the incinerator out back.

I didn't add this restaurant's name to my list for return visits, which is a shame, because, as it turned out, they served Certified Angus Beef.

A game I like to play when dining out is one I started after I had read an article about Certified Angus Beef. In the article, the writer suggested that we, as Angus breeders, should ask our favorite restaurant why they don't serve CAB, if it isn't already on their menu.

The first time I asked if the meat the establishment served was CAB, the waitress quickly replied "Yes."

"Why isn't it marked on the menu?" I questioned.

"I don't know. How would it be marked?" she asked me.

By that time she figured I was some kind of a crazy, and she never did give us our second cup of coffee.

At the next restaurant I asked the waitress and she said she didn't know, but she would ask the cook. About 15 minutes later she returned. They had been in the kitchen looking at the beef boxes, trying to figure out what kind of beef they were serving.

Another time in a smorgasboard type restaurant, I asked the young man who was carving a large cut of beef. I bid him a good evening and told him how large a piece I wanted and the degree of doneness. As he carved, I asked him if it was Certified Angus Beef.

"No, Madam," he replied, never missing a stroke. "It is roast."

Probably the most memorable inquiry happened last year in San Antonio on our way to the Fort Worth Stock Show. We stayed at a very lovely old hotel renowned for its Old World Spanish decor and outstanding service.

We elected to eat in the hotel restaurant, because they served prime beef. The efficient maitre d' showed us to a table overlooking San Antonio's famous river walk and introduced us to our waiter, Raul. Raul was everything you could ever ask for in a waiter; he was polite, helpful, efficient, and, most of all, he was smooth.

I ordered fresh seafood, and my husband, of course, ordered beef; beef medallions, to be exact. Raul served the elegant main course and discreetly backed off a few steps to wait a moment or two before inquiring if everything was satisfactory. The seafood was excellent, and my hus-

band remarked that the beef was really succulent and tender.

"Beef this good has to be Angus. Is that what you serve, Certified Angus Beef?" my husband inquired.

Raul looked blank; he had no idea what my husband was talking about. "Last year, sir, we made the medallions from filet, but this year we used sirloin," he said.

Not one to be deterred, my husband tried to explain that we were beef breeders and about the Certified Angus Beef Program. By now Raul was totally confused all remnants of the smooth waiter had disappeared, and the man definitely looked flustered. I think Raul was glad we elected not to have dessert, and relieved to see us depart. If that restaurant ever does begin serving CAB, he will probably remember us.

At work, recently we ordered steak sandwiches from a local establishment; we didn't expect CAB, but fully expected to receive a Philadelphia-type steak sandwich made from frozen sandwich steaks. (My son says that type of steak is the pressed-together meat fragments cleaned out of commercial meat saws). What was served to us in the buns resembled a piece of elastic; it looked like beef, smelled like beef, but you could actually stretch it, and it would snap back to its original size.

The big question was: what is it? I was of the opinion it was a slice of rump from a 17-year-old dairy cow. No reorders on steak sandwiches, please!

Not long ago, I met a man who really knew the kind of beef he was serving. I

attended our Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association field day. At lunch time the association served charcoal grilled ribeye steak sandwiches.

As I proceeded down the line to the grill area, I asked the gentlemen serving the steaks what kind of beef he was serving. He smiled and asked me what kind of cattle I raised. I answered Angus.

"Well you are in luck, little lady, because that is exactly the kind of beef we are serving today."

I turned to the Simmental breeder behind me and told him to ask the man the same question.

The man serving laughed and said, "You are in luck, sir; her steak was the last of the Angus and your piece of steak is from a Simmental."

I have to hand it to the man serving he definitely knows his beef. Incidentally, he works for our state's Beef Council; I'm not sure in what capacity, but I'll bet it has something to do with public relations.

One thing I have learned: I am never quite sure what answer I will receive when I inquire about the beef I am eating, but it certainly is interesting.

So take it from a fellow Angus breeder, next time you dine out, if you don't dine in one of the 6,000 restaurants who serve CAB, and you choose to dine in one of the large number of "other" restaurants, who serve various "other" brands of beef, ask the question yourself. It helps keep the restaurateurs and waiters on their toes, and it beats talking about the weather.

