

Freestyle Cooking

Culinary Innovation Days inspire chefs to create.

by Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC

A loop of '80s music plays in the background as a half dozen chefs "in the zone" spread out among the cooking space of the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB) brand's Culinary Center.

They are chopping and searing, cracking jokes and laughing.

Chef Gavin Pinto says he was too excited to sleep until the morning alarm. He just couldn't wait to get to work. Chef Ashley Breneman describes the day with two words: "no boundaries."

"You know freestyle skiing?" asks

Chef Tony Biggs, director of culinary arts for the brand. "Well, we call this freestyle cooking."

"The goal of Innovation Days is to give them a chance to feed off each other and share ideas." — Deanna Walenciak

Culinary Innovation Days. It's been blocked out on their calendars for months, but when the anticipation gives way to a flow of ideas, that's when the magic happens.

The two-day session in December marks the second year for the break from the chefs' ordinary daily grind.

The brand plans to make it an annual event at the very least.

"They're really cooking for the sake of sharing ideas, being creative, trying new things; not the pressure of, 'I've got to put out a lunch at noon,'" says

Deanna Walenciak, CAB director of education. With team commitments that range from public relations to education, it's hard to commit two full days to playing around in the



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The corporate chefs are often pulled in many different directions, so it's hard to find a two-day block where they are all in the kitchen at the same time, but it's worth it, says Deanna Walenciak, director of education for the brand.

kitchen, but that team is critical to helping CAB continue leadership as innovators in all things beef, she says.

As artists, chefs need time to practice their art, away from the tasks of creating consumer recipes, doing TV appearances and serving guests at the Culinary Center or other corporate events.

“The goal of Innovation Days is to give them a chance to feed off each other and share ideas,” Walenciak says.

They gather ingredient lists 10 days out, get the groceries, then spend one day prepping and one day finishing anywhere from five to eight dishes per chef. But just like all things related to innovation days, there are no set rules, no requirements, no pressure.

“When you’re delivering a banquet, you must be on time. You must have your preparation on time, your thoughts together so you can execute flawlessly,” Biggs says. “This is a chance to make mistakes and just free flow.”

There is no requirement that a main course pairs with an appetizer, or that a dish performs when held for long periods.

“Everybody’s just cooking and going,” Walenciak says. “It’s got this fun atmosphere.”

The day is not set up based on an elaborate strategy and desired results; but even without much of the former, there’s definitely plenty of the latter.

Getting around ground round

“Make us love the round.”

That was Walenciak’s challenge to the chefs in 2017.

“We knew we had a seminar coming up where we were going to

be focused on the round,” she says, noting the sales and packing team set that direction. “The general feeling in the culinary world is, it’s a tougher and less flavorful cut.”



Each chef creates four to six dishes, and the sky is the limit. There are no hungry guests to feed, no rules or recipes.

The chefs tried new methods and flavor combinations, and came up with recipes that moved the general feeling from, “meh, the round...” to, “wow, that’s the round?”

They started to talk about it more often with Culinary Center visitors and featured the round at the brand’s Foodservice Leaders Summit a few months later. There, three half-hour rotations covered menu ideas, product availability, opportunities and sales tips.

“It’s all part of it,” Walenciak says. “The chefs threw some fuel on what we were just starting to kindle.”

From fiscal year 2017 to 2018, CAB round sales jumped 11.8%, second in growth only to the brisket.

“That’s how we really move the needle: we heighten awareness,” Walenciak says.

Each time a less popular item moves up in popularity, that’s a positive signal that gets carried all the way back to the ranch.

“If we can sell more rounds, then

we can add more value to that overall *Certified Angus Beef* carcass,” she says. “We got out of the mentality that people just grind it up anyway.”

The most recent innovation session put the top sirloin in the spotlight.

“It’s a bit of an underutilized middle meat,” says Walenciak, but it offers a competitive option for creativity in a traditional steakhouse. “If they’re at the point where they’re looking for a more attractive price point than a tenderloin, I want them to look at a *Certified Angus Beef* top sirloin and keep beef on the menu, instead of replacing it with a seafood or one of the other proteins.”

Each chef brings his or her own background, from growing up in and cooking in different regions around the world. Their personalities come out in their dishes.

“If I’m thinking about something I really want to try out, this is a great place to do it,” Biggs says.

Popular food photographer Ben Hon, @StuffBenEats, captured the results of the 2018 day. His pictures showed creations like a short-rib cheesecake made of beef and macaroni, brisket tamales with ancho peppercorn sauce, bone-marrow sponge cake and aged beef dashi.

When the music gives way to the hum of the dishwasher, they finally get a chance to step back and admire the art in front of them.

In between “I love what you did there” and “I would have never thought of doing it like that,” there’s an overriding sense of accomplishment. They created.

The beef business will certainly be better for it. **AJ**