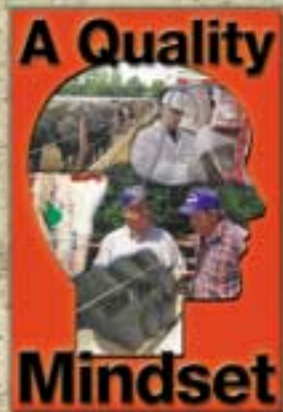


# Tarpoff Trailblazer

A small Illinois packer “steaks” its reputation on CAB® Prime.

STORY & PHOTOS BY BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON



**F**rom the road, the small, aged brick building on a concrete lot next to a massive steel-manufacturing complex looks out of place. Only the sign on top identifies what's on the other side of the old bricks as a packing plant.

But enter the unassuming surroundings of Tarpoff Packing Co., Granite City, Ill., and you step into a world where packer tradition and trailblazing mesh. The 40-head/day-capacity plant, one of the smallest facilities licensed by Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), was the first to find a lasting niche in *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Prime production.

“From a business standpoint, the big packers keep getting bigger, and the small packers are going away,” says Craig Tarpoff, who owns the business with his brother John. “But we wanted to stay in business and decided to find a solid niche market.”

Tarpoff has 10 employees who slaughter and process primarily Angus and Angus-type cattle. At the request of one of their customers in Chicago, they got into CAB production, and it has become their niche.

The brothers' grandfather, John, created Tarpoff Packing in 1935. His sons John, Vasil and Alexander joined him, and the latter ran the business until 1983 when his sons took charge.

“Packing has been a part of our lives since we were kids and we helped out here,” John says. “The packing business is what we are used to and what we know.”

## Tradition and flexibility

Dramatic changes have occurred at Tarpoff through the years, reflecting changes in the packing industry. John says his father ran a carcass-only business and did no processing. But by the mid-1980s, John and Craig began offering primal-cut beef sides. By the mid-1990s, their business shifted — with everyone else's — into boxed beef.

With that move came the shift to CAB. What stands out in this case is that about 70% of the meat the Tarpoffs process is CAB Prime, compared to the 2% of all U.S. fed-cattle slaughter that makes it to the top grade. The Tarpoffs average 550 head of CAB carcasses per month and saw a 38% rise in CAB volume from 1999 to 2000.

“Service and quality are our main attractions,” Craig says. “Our customer base is small- to medium-sized and includes top-end restaurants and steak houses from Seattle to Florida, grocery and retail stores, and a local presence in the greater Saint Louis market in Illinois and Missouri.”

Success also is tied to flexibility and the ability to customize sales. As a small packer, Craig adds, they can produce more easily specialty cuts for customers that are different from the conventional cuts large packers provide, but John and Craig keep their specialty cuts a secret.

“CAB is a great business and has a lot of name recognition in the marketplace,” John says. “We’ve found that CAB is the No. 1 value-added product available.”

### On the hoof

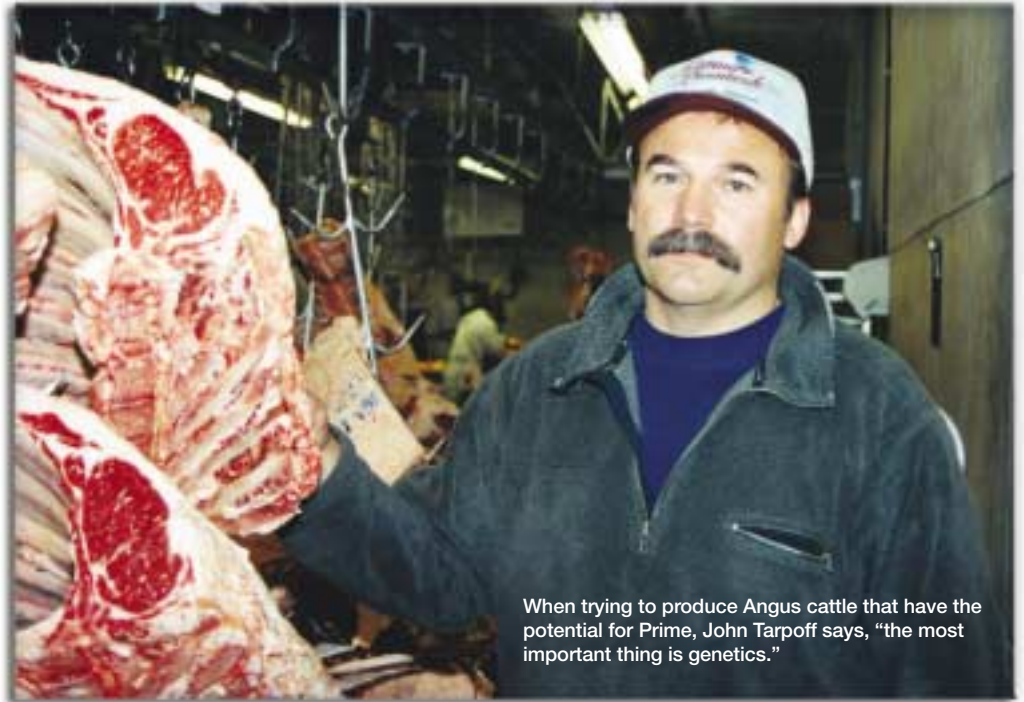
CAB quality goes back to the Angus cattle that produce top beef, John adds. To find Angus cattle that meet the grade, he makes frequent appearances at area sale barns, and he works with a steady and diversified clientele that includes cow-calf operators, farmer-feeders and feedlots.

“People have stayed with us the last five or six years to supply cattle, but I always look for more suppliers,” John says.

Craig adds, “Just John’s presence at a sale barn can have an influence on sale prices. We may bid on a lot of cattle, but we don’t always buy them.”

John works closely with his group of producers and feeders, coaching them from the sidelines about how to raise Angus cattle that have the potential for Prime. “The most important thing is genetics,” he says. “I also like to know how the animal was fed and handled and the type of conditions the animal was raised under before sale.”

John prefers cattle without implants, not because he is against the technology, but because he says meat marbles better without them.



When trying to produce Angus cattle that have the potential for Prime, John Tarpoff says, “the most important thing is genetics.”

He tracks every animal slaughtered, generally via ear tags, so he can provide carcass performance data back to the owner.

“I share all of the information with suppliers so they know what is working and what is not,” he says. “That will help producers upgrade feed rations or change genetics if, for example, their bull is throwing midgrade cattle.”

### On the rail

The Tarpoffs also take extra steps in grading carcasses that lead to benefits for both buyer and seller. Where a larger packer might pay a farmer-feeder for the cattle once they are sold or carcass graded, the Tarpoffs slaughter and hang the carcass for three or four days before making a decision on the grade.

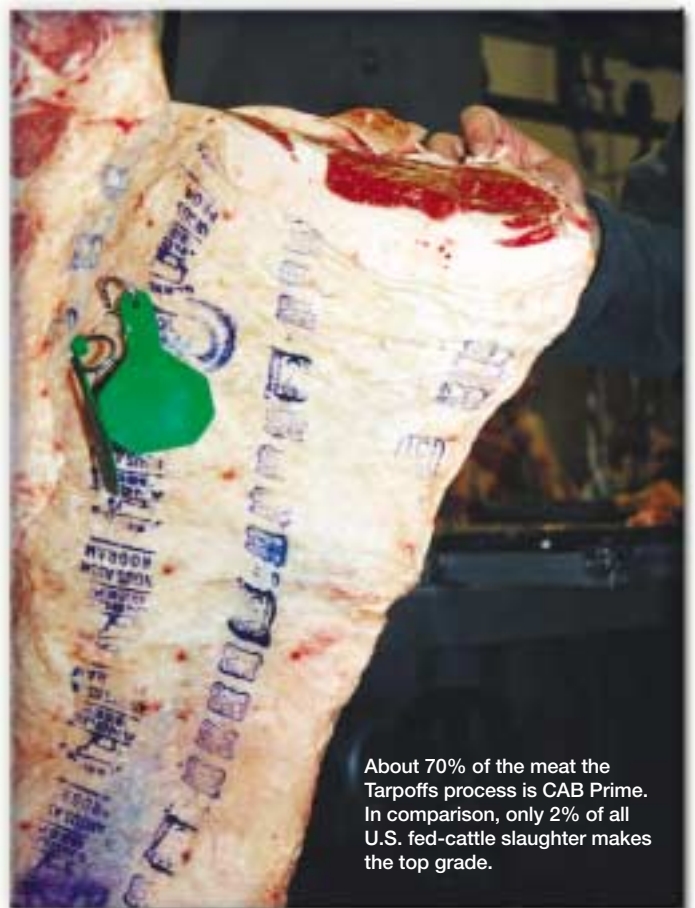
“We wait for full bloom on each carcass before it gets graded, and then we tell the producer what the grade is,” he says. “That gives us the best possible grade and gives producers the best possible price because often the grade will get better. Big packers can’t afford that luxury.”

With the Tarpoff grading philosophy top of mind, John adds, Angus producers should

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**“We’re all in this together – the cow-calf operator, the farmer-feeder, the feedlot, the packer, the purveyor and the retailer. We must be cognizant of everyone in the food chain and be aware that, if someone skimps or cheats, everyone suffers.”**

**—John Tarpoff**



About 70% of the meat the Tarpoffs process is CAB Prime. In comparison, only 2% of all U.S. fed-cattle slaughter makes the top grade.

consider with whom they do business and how that could change their operation down the road.

"It's to the benefit of producers to keep small packers around because there is such a big diversity of end users in the country," John says. "Otherwise, if we end up with just a few packers left, they will be telling producers what kind of cattle to bring in, and that puts

producers at the mercy of big-packer needs."

Small packers may have the edge in the future as the international beef market blossoms. The Tarpoffs are experimenting with Asian export markets.

"There is huge potential in the export market, but we are fiscally limited at this time and have no freezer to handle the fresh, frozen market the

Japanese demand," John says.

"But parts of the carcass bring top dollar in Japan, so that market may be of benefit to us in the future."

Whether domestic or international, John believes that, for their business to succeed, the food chain from producer to consumer will have to become more tightly linked.

"We're all in this together — the cow-calf operator, the

farmer-feeder, the feedlot, the packer, the purveyor and the retailer," he says. "We must be cognizant of everyone in the food chain and be aware that, if someone skimps or cheats, everyone suffers. We are going to have to develop an understanding of the type of products that will satisfy consumers if we are all going to succeed."



## Priming the consumer pump

If Tarpoff Packing Co. needs feedback on their *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Prime cuts, they don't have to look much farther than their own backyard. As original owners of Andria's Countryside Restaurant in neighboring Edwardsville, Ill., they were the first restaurant to offer CAB Prime beef.

"We started serving CAB Prime there last year, which made us the only restaurant to be exclusively CAB Prime," Craig Tarpoff says. "We select the cuts, and then all of the meat is hand cut at the restaurant."

The menu tempts the taste buds with such features as a 20-ounce (oz.) center-cut chateaubriand for two, filet mignon, a 24-oz. sirloin steak and roasted prime rib.

"There is a big difference in the taste and flavor of Prime beef," says Jon DuBay, Andria's Countryside Restaurant chef, who works with Tarpoff's vacuum-packaged tenderloins that weigh around 4 pounds (lb.). "The marbling in the Prime makes the cuts even better than Choice, and [it] is easy to trim and prepare. It's very lean and tender."

"Customers tell us it's the best piece of beef they've ever had," Tarpoff adds. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* named Andria's the "Best Steak House in Saint Louis." It also has been named best restaurant in southern Illinois.

Need reservations? Call (618) US-PRIME (877-7463).



**Above:** "There is a big difference in the taste and flavor of Prime beef," says Jon DuBay, Andria's Countryside Restaurant chef, who works with Tarpoff's vacuum-packaged tenderloins.



**Left:** Tarpoff customers include top-end restaurants and steak houses from Seattle to Florida, including their own Andria's Countryside Restaurant in neighboring Edwardsville, Ill.



**Left:** Andria's Countryside Restaurant started serving CAB Prime last year, making it the first restaurant to be exclusively CAB Prime.