

Beef Geeks, Cow Nerds

Legacy lends itself to both sides of the beef business.

Story & photos by Laura Conaway, Certified Angus Beef LLC

When the snow melts and the boat docks are in at the Flaming Gorge Reservoir, *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand beef had better be on the shelf in Mountain View, Wyo.

Those were the words of a dreamer. This is the reality of Jim Benedict.

“The docks freeze, so they reinstall them every year,” he says of the popular spot just across the Utah

border. “Come spring, the docks are in, and people want steaks.”

It’s about local traffic and tourism, he says. It’s about giving the customer what they want.

At 5:30 in the morning, the Wyoming rancher and retailer is out the door and in his Ford. First, it’s the store. Then it’s the cattle. Then it’s the store and back again.

Benedict’s

From one role to the other, Benedict’s Market is its namesake’s first stop with the sunrise. A staple in town, its sign on the right welcomes the few who pass through and the many who stay.

His grandfather and father, too, once greeted customers and cowboys who came “for a loaf of bread or livestock equipment.”

Then, the cattle had to come second.

Now — with Jim and his brother, Bruce, at the till — pasture and plate take equal stake in their lives and work, each better off because of the other.



“People tell us we’re crazy,” he says, juggling both ends of the beef business, “but we just do our own thing.”

Perhaps an ode to the outlaws who once roamed the same Wyoming lands, there’s a hint of rebellion in the grocer’s words, but not just for legend’s sake.

Walking out the front door of Benedict’s in a ball cap and boots, he’s no Butch Cassidy or Sundance Kid. Benedict smiles and greets neighbors



with a handshake, looks them in the eye and asks questions below the surface.

He’s learned it doesn’t hurt to be different, though, to try something that seems out of reach. So, he goes against all odds and dares the doubt.

That’s how the whole CAB thing came to be.

In April 2017 it was only an idea — a far-fetched one at that.

By May 24 it was in the meatcase — the docks barely installed in that lake water.

Back to the basics

“We decided we were going to go old school and put in a full-service case and see how that works,” Benedict says.

It’d been out of the store for 38 years, but the resurgence of a young meat cutter inspired the brothers.

“Just a little ten-footer” — that’s what they installed to see what their meatcase manager could do with sales. Did he sell beef? “He just knocked that thing completely out of the park,” Benedict observes.

Benedict’s is known for “fresh food, exceptional service and community support.” They had experienced success with premium beef when they would run it as an occasional weekly ad in a circular.

Part of Associated Food Stores, a retail cooperative, “We knew some of the more progressive stores were using CAB and making it happen,

that it worked,” Benedict says.

Then he thought about his cattle and the literature he had read about the world’s largest branded-beef program.

“We went down to a food show in April, and Associated didn’t know if they could pull it off,” he says. Supply, demand and the impending summer season said it would be six months.

Benedict, ever polite, had other plans.

“I got home and got on the phone and said, ‘Hey, I need to pull the trigger on this. Let’s get this thing rocking and rolling.’”

The guy on the other line called another guy and “two weeks later I was on the program,” he recalls.

His reputation helped.

“We filled out the paperwork, got licensed, point-of-sale materials were sent and logos arrived. It was just gangbusters,” he explains.

It was 22 days.

Since then, life and the days that comprise it haven’t slackened.

“We were blending the producer side of things with the retail side of things,” Benedict says. To them, it made sense. “We knew what the end product was. We knew what the going-in product was. It was that little spot in the middle we needed.”

He stops for a second to declare: “We’re geeks. Beef geeks.”

What’s been the most exciting, though, is the customer response — or lack thereof, depending on how you see it.

“The biggest fear we had going in was whether people would balk at the prices,” he says. A year later, he reports that it’s been the least important care to the consumer.

“Once they got that quality in their mouth, we haven’t had anyone say a negative word. That’s been

the smoothest part of the whole transition. No margin compression in the meat department.”

Now the challenge is keeping that little case stocked.

“The customers have CAB down and, with the summer months, they’ll buy a whole tray. It’s just a wonderful program,” Benedict says.

Cow quality

The 1,100-pound (lb.) Angus cows they graze in the mountains and



bring down to Bridger Valley each fall show that commitment to quality.

The Benedicts genomically profile every bull on the place with the Zoetis HD-50K test.

“We’re building a commercial cow database that has documentation and DNA,” he says with pride.

Natural-service bulls get their chance 20 days after the brothers artificially inseminate (AI) the heifers and top 70 cows in early May. A March 1 calving start means the following May they’ll brand and castrate.

“They leave here the 20th of June to go up to the mountain,” he explains. The 13-mile trek takes them to private land atop a 9,000-foot hill where timothy is lush and calves are expected to gain 2.5 lb. per day.

“We bring them down in the

middle of October, and we condition them,” Benedict says. “November 5, we ship.”

Before that, they look for the right genetics on paper when bull shopping.

“I want to see a spread,” he says. “I want a 70-pound birth weight that weans at 750 pounds.”

Not to mention his critique of the expected progeny difference (EPD) for marbling and the beef value selection index (\$B), too.

“You kind of become a cow nerd,” he says.

He’ll cull for poor pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP), age and body condition “because they’ve got to be able to eat.”

“If they are in good flesh, I’m not afraid of a 15-year-old,” he says.

An afternoon with Benedict shows he’s not afraid of much. He approaches all of it with optimism and certainty because they’ve done the

hard work on the front end.

“It’s really fun,” he says of watching the futures board, tracking corn prices and negotiating when to sell and for what price.

“Often, our four truckloads of calves will be some of the highest-priced cattle that go out of this valley,” he says. In 2016, when the market fell, the Benedict brothers got 30¢ more.

It’s the details, or maybe the brothers’ sheer determination, that shed light on even better things to come. There’s no doubt they get an interesting view of the industry from both sides.

A lot can happen in 22 days. **AJ**

Editor’s Note: Laura Conaway is a producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.