

Cowtown Cuisine

Folks in cow country know what good beef is, but they also know the value of a dollar and are less willing to pay big-city restaurant prices. At Uncle Ed's Steakhouse in Broken Bow, Neb., Ed and Anita Sabatka give discriminating beef eaters plenty of reason to come back.

BY TROY SMITH



FANCY SIT-DOWN RESTAURANTS are scarce in cow country. Not that there aren't some good places to eat. Away from the fast-food frenzy there are plenty of cafes that offer simple, wholesome fare. (Just try the chicken-fried steak!) But there aren't too many places that specialize in consistently high-quality food served in an atmosphere seasoned with ambiance. That's a combination more likely found in pricey, big-city restaurants — not in cowtown.

Rural restaurateurs need not take offense. It's not impossible to find a good steakhouse in the hinterlands. Proud people from Broken Bow, Neb., claim their



hometown boasts one of them. The seat of a county where cattle outnumber the 12,000 residents 500-to-1, Broken Bow is a trade center for some mighty discerning beef eaters. And whether they are country or town folk, more and more are frequenting Uncle Ed's Steakhouse. Proprietors Ed and Anita Sabatka have a reputation for delivering a superior eating experience — a reputation they earned long before they welcomed guests to their restaurant.

(Above) For livestock nutritionist Ed Sabatka and wife, Anita, cooking for occasional get-togethers evolved into a busy catering business and now a restaurant that strives to please discriminating beef eaters. Ed says a close trim plus careful aging and proper preparation are keys to customer satisfaction, but it's important to start out with quality meat. He relies on Certified Angus Beef™ products.

Earning in the trenches

Uncle Ed's opened only a few months ago, but the Sabatkas are no strangers to foodservice. They have operated a successful catering business for several years. Actually, Ed wears many hats, and the intertwining of his vocation and avocation makes a story good for the telling.

By training and by trade, Ed is a livestock nutritionist and consultant. He has applied himself to that endeavor for 25 years, and for the last decade he has been associated with a feed company based in Broken Bow. Located along the eastern fringe of Nebraska's Sandhills, the area features diverse beef operations. Ranchers, seedstock producers, stocker operators and cattle feeders number among Ed's clients.

Always interested in cooking, Ed honed his hobby with particular emphasis on beef. His culinary talents were first revealed to the public through customer-appreciation events — grilling steaks for business clients. Compliments to the cook came in the form of requests for Ed to prepare beef for family reunions and private parties. Word about Ed's way with everything from burgers to prime rib spread quickly, particularly after several seedstock clients hired him to cater meals served for their production sales.

Hobby turns to business

As demand for Uncle Ed's Catering Service grew, Ed's wife, Anita, left a career in insurance to help cater events, including banquets for service and civic clubs, as well as company picnics and parties. With their custom-built, portable cooker in tow, the Sabatkas worked a radius of more than 100 miles from Broken Bow. Crowds of up to 500 guests have been served at functions like the annual Sandhills Cattle Association Convention and the Cattle Barons' Ball (a cancer fund-raiser coordinated by the Nebraska Beef Council and the Nebraska CattleWomen). This summer Uncle Ed's will venture out some 200 miles to cater the Nebraska Cattlemen's Mid-Year Convention. But now, along with the catering service, the

Sabatkas operate a steakhouse.

"At almost every event, two or three guests would suggest that we open a restaurant," says Anita. "It wasn't like Ed hadn't thought about it already. Then the opportunity presented itself."

That opportunity came in the form of an offer from the local Elks' lodge. The lodge was struggling with the task of managing its supper club. The lodge brothers believed leasing the facility to the Sabatkas could benefit the community and solve their management problems.

Beef at center plate

After pondering the possibilities and penciling some projections, the couple agreed. Last March Uncle Ed's Steakhouse opened its doors. It filled its 200-seat capacity the first night. Glowing reviews followed, and business hasn't slowed since. And while the offering includes pork, poultry and seafood, most customers want beef to occupy the center of their plates. So, including a variety of loin cuts and sizes, the menu features 16 beef entrees. There are no corners cut here — even the chicken-fried steak is top sirloin.

"Virtually all we serve is *Certified Angus Beef*™ product purchased in boxed lots," says Ed. "It's consistently high-quality product, box after box and loin after loin. We cut and trim it ourselves. Actually, it comes pretty closely trimmed, but it's almost fully trimmed by the time we're through."

Ed admits that a lot of people talk about how they like to see just a little bit of fat remaining to enhance flavor and juiciness, but he believes the *Certified Angus Beef* product is marbled well enough that no external fat is needed. Still, for added flavor and tenderness, Ed does age his beef in the bag at 32-34° F for about four weeks.

Whether catered or served in the restaurant, all beef is cooked over charcoal and wood. And depending on customer preferences, Ed can spice things up with his own blend of about 10 different seasonings.

Thriving on a busy schedule, Ed still counsels cattlemen about herd nutrition while managing the catering and restaurant businesses. Actually, Anita manages most of the day-to-day restaurant operation. And their capable chef, Ryan Anderson, has been thoroughly schooled in the particulars of cutting and cooking to Uncle Ed's specifications. Ed still likes to order the beef himself and supervise its aging.

Commodity beef too costly

Ed says he has found that the commodity beef ribeyes and loins he tried were inconsistent for quality. Toughness was a



An Uncle Ed's fan for several years, Angus breeder Lowell Minert, left, relies on Ed Sabatka's culinary skills to provide lunch for the annual Minert bull sale.

problem and trim loss ran as high as 60%. Even if it did cost \$1/pound less, he couldn't afford it. With the *Certified Angus Beef* loins, even Ed's deep-cutting knife results in 25% trim or less. Moreover, the product's marbling and smooth texture is more palate-pleasing.

"With our customers, the No. 1 issue is tenderness. And a lot of our catered steaks and prime ribs have been served outside and eaten with plastic knives and forks," says Ed. "We don't use plastic at the restaurant, but we certainly want the beef to be tender enough that you could."

"We strive for a great first impression — a superior eating experience that makes guests want to come back," Ed continues. "And when they do, they have to be treated to another experience that is equally satisfying. The meat we serve is a big part of it, but we think it's important that other aspects of the meal and the service don't take anything away from that."

Challenged to make the fixings fit with the main course, the Sabatkas offer a variety of greens, including Romaine, Raddichio and red/green leaf lettuces, served with hard-crust rolls instead of crackers. Seven different potato choices include the standard baked and french fries, but also less traditional tubers, including roasted red potatoes, Dutch gilder potatoes and whipped sweet potatoes. French bread accompanies the meal, and Ed even tested nine different coffees before settling on a dark Columbian roast that he considered complementary to the menu.

"We're trying to offer something comparable to the nice steakhouses in Omaha and Denver," Anita adds. "People come expecting a quality meal, but they expect quality service, too. So we've tried to add some big-city touches. Of course, we

stress polite service, and the waiters and waitresses have to be knowledgeable about our food and how it is prepared. They are supposed to serve guests, so bus-people clear the tables. And staff members dress like staff so they are easy to distinguish from guests."

Anita says the biggest challenge has been meeting demand. During the height of a busy evening, the kitchen might receive as many as 30 orders in 15 minutes. First-rate meals can't be served up in fast-food fashion, so the wait for their food may be a bit longer than to what some local customers are accustomed. She hopes most are discovering that it's worth the wait.

Discriminating palates

"People here know what good beef is. I believe they're more discriminating than a lot of city people, yet less willing to pay a quality price for a quality meal," Anita adds. "We've tried to gear our prices to this area. A \$20 New York strip won't fly here, but it does at \$14.50. And a lot of first-time customers are really surprised at all they get for the price."

Ed agrees, proud of the praise that Uncle Ed's has garnered in so short a time.

"It's the total package that sells," he explains. "People in this part of the country seem to like a place with plenty of elbow room. We've got plenty of room to serve quite a few people without crowding them together. People like the atmosphere. And people like choices, so we're trying hard to give them that, along with more service than they're used to. But at the center of it there has to be a superior cut of meat. That's what draws them in. If you can give it to them every time, they'll come back."

