

COOKING UP *Perspective*

*South Carolina rancher and
chef trade places.*

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“One of my favorite images from yesterday was being on the horse, moving the cattle to the other pasture to feed on the grass. I mean, it was all the things I imagined they do. The quietness of being on the horse, it was pretty magical.”
– Chef Jeremiah Bacon, Charleston, S.C.

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It's nearly a three-hour drive from big-city Charleston to Ridge Spring, S.C. With every mile people become fewer and cattle take their place.

It's a new commute for Jeremiah Bacon, the sun bouncing off the chef's windshield headed west. As Oak Steakhouse Charleston's chef and partner, he's more inclined to burn the midnight oil, less apt to watch the day wake.

His counterparts, though — the ranchers in this quality-beef movement — they see new mornings all the time.

Caring for the cattle that supply the steaks, beef's bookends set out to watch one together for a change.

"We're gonna make Jeremiah into a cowboy today," Kevin Yon teases his crew as the chef slides into Yon Family Farm's morning meeting.

The two were scheduled to trade places and it seemed only logical to start at the beginning.

"Have you ever sat on a horse?" Yon prods Bacon with care.

"Sure, yeah," Bacon stumbles to say. It may have been a few years. "I mean I don't think I can gallop or anything."

There would be none of that, no funny business on Yon's turf that could result in retaliation tomorrow. Besides, Bacon brought no boots — out of fear he'd recreate a scene from *City Slickers* — but Yon would get him on a horse nonetheless.

"On a typical morning in the spring, we're still breeding cows," Yon says. As they separate two from the rest he walks the chef through a regular day that's always changing.

Bacon nods; the respected chef knows a thing or two about spontaneity, adjusting when life happens.

"This can make your head hurt this early in the morning," Yon says while scanning a page of columns and data. "It's just numbers, but if they're good numbers, a lot of progress can be made."

Estimated progeny differences (EPDs) are what help ensure Bacon's customers get the eating experience they desire. They also explain what semen they'll use for the heifer in the chute.

"I'm about to show you more than what you will want to know, but it's the process," Yon says, slipping on a sleeve.

He palpates the animal before guiding Bacon to do the same.

"Do you use your dominant hand?" Bacon asks before he preps to artificially inseminate (AI). In restaurant speak, one's "pan hand," is the stronger hand used to maneuver the sauté pans; the other for more intricate, detail-type work. Bacon explains

his inquiry and questions whether AI requires a similar strategy.

"Most people will use their left but you go with what's comfortable," Yon says — as if any of the morning's responsibilities

are for the chef.

"I started out the day looking for the cervix, so that was pretty intense," Bacon says with wide eyes.

But he was committed, eager to learn and see life on the other side.

"What was her number? D-597?" Bacon asks to make a mental note. "We'll see if I got her bred."

A calf in the fall will mean just that, and ultrasound will tell Yon in a matter of weeks.

For now, Bacon would get horseback to drive some cattle before using the tractor to mow and the military feed truck for growing steers. He'd prep a cow for embryo transfer and tag a new calf — the latter his favorite part.

Producing the best

From a bird's-eye view, they look pretty different, farmer and chef. It's often not until they're face-to-face, interacting and asking questions of one another that the similarities come into focus.

It's in the details and precision, the passion and the pride that make up the big picture.

To consumers, these are men working alongside family, whether by blood or by choice. These are men providing wholesome food for the world.

This is what Bacon and Yon do well. Both together and separate.

"Our independent success is dependent on each other," Yon says. "That's the cool part."

Understanding one another's process only helps.

"Our worlds are this far apart. I'm at the beginning and he's almost at the end," Yon says after diving in the deep end at the Oak. The farmer's arms stretch wide to show the point. "But there are

"We see ourselves as a link in a pretty big chain," Bacon says. "To have the knowledge and awareness of what goes on through the entire system makes it better for everyone."

so many similarities in what we do, and I couldn't be more pleased with people like Chef Bacon and his staff who represent our final product."

We all want it to be the very best."

It's true. Bacon allows nothing less at the Oak. Returning customers demand it. His standard that all beef served is Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) does not waiver.

"People want to know where their food's coming from, 'what's the process,' 'what's this thing with CAB®?'" he says. "Man, it's about small ranches, it's about small farms, that's what it's about."

Education and real experience provide him an unparalleled perspective.

"I've been to Nebraska, I've been to Montana and the same dedication, the same follow-through and the same techniques are going on in all these different areas. It's very impressive."

Yon feels the same of his teammates in the kitchen. Nearly 30 hours after Bacon joined the rancher's early meeting, the chef's staff is gathered upstairs at the Oak for an evening run. This time a cattleman sits in.

"I don't know if you consider yourselves part of agriculture but we do consider you very much a part of agriculture," Yon says. "Together, we are a part of food production, providing meals for people. What could be more noble than that?"

There's a silence that says they get it. Heads nod and chests rise. The 24oz. CAB dry-age ribeye they're set to push carries new meaning.

"We've put three years into the steer going on the plate tonight," Yon says. "Three years ago we made that decision."



"I didn't realize what a precise process it was," Kevin Yon says after grabbing a knife to cut 16 oz. steaks. "The butcher and chef, they look at every steak as an individual much like we do cattle." The similarities don't end there.

"We're on the two-yard line here," Bacon adds.

They're on the same page.

"Often people will come in the restaurant, confused as to how we get it all out at the same time. 'I struggle with 10 people at thanksgiving,' they'll say. It's all about being organized," Bacon says. "Using our systems we've put in place, much like the ones they do at the ranch."

For Yon, those systems and Bacon's close coaching kept the Oak running like the "well-oiled machine" the rancher witnessed when he stepped behind the counter for his chance to contribute to the endgame.

"Feels like your back's on fire, doesn't it?" Yon asks Bacon's sous chef. His glass of water dwindles in no time.

After a quick lesson in action, the rancher dives in and does his best to stay afloat. Plating, facilitating, calling out

orders, bringing ingredients from the cooler and steaks to the tables, hours go by in a flash.

"Yesterday we were weighing baby calves and today we weighed steaks," Yon says of the contrast of he and Bacon's day-to-day. Back home he'll carry with him a better understanding and share it with those who will listen.

"That I could take a CAB prime ribeye, that perhaps came from our farm or others like it, and know everything that was behind that product, that the quality was there and we didn't miss the finish line, that's very gratifying," Yon says.

The line gets busy behind them, and the chef has to step in to keep the pace.

"I thought you were going to call for me any minute," Yon says retiring his apron for the night.

If Bacon needs him, he'll be there, a partner and friend. **AJ**