

Reinventing Family Style

Chicago-area culinary couple challenges convention with tasty ideas.

by Abbie Burnett, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Food is more than tasty. It is sexy and fun. It's not Sunday school; it's rock and roll. It's creative. These are the culinary values to which Greg and Kristina Gaardbo hold.

They know they look a little different for the industry. Tattoos wrap down their arms, peek out from clothing and above collar lines to go with eyebrow piercings and big-gauge earrings. Kristina even sports a platinum-blond mohawk.

"We shake it up a bit," she says. But they fit in — in their own way.

"We give people a different perspective on what we do — show that it's versatile," Greg says.

That openness has brought a lot of success, but it has also brought them something else. Family.

It started with each other. They met at a gym, dated for almost two years and married in 2011. Individual passions for food became a common pursuit. Greg always wanted to be a chef, but he joined the Marines right out of high school. Kristina was a nurse for several years, but enjoyed cooking

and baking. Together, backyard entertaining became a regular pastime.

"I'd be inside on appetizers and drinks," Kristina says. "Greg would be outside on the grill doing indirect smoking. Parties got bigger and bigger."

So they expanded their family — professionally.

Culinary Kitchen was born in a suburban strip mall in Palatine, Ill.

The meat is *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®), slow-smoked Texas style. The rub features only four ingredients: salt, pepper, granulated garlic and espresso powder. Thus prepared, they put it on the smoker, timed precisely for removal at their opening time of 11 a.m., Saturdays and Sundays. In

about three hours, it will all be gone.

"It always leaves them wanting more," Greg says.

The point is to make everything as fresh as possible, says Kristina, and to let the meat be the star.

They chose Texas-style barbecue for two reasons: simplicity and simplicity.

"You go to a lot of different barbecue places, and it's like IHOP. There should be one sauce, if sauce at all," Greg says. He

wants to hand the meat over and go, "Here it is. It's speaking to you."

They can only do that if the meat is consistent every single time.

"Consistency is the biggest thing, in size, marbling, everything," says Kristina. "If you don't start with a great product like *Certified Angus*



Greg and Kristina Gaardbo say they chose Texas-style barbecue featuring the CAB brand for their Chicago Culinary Kitchen for two reasons: simplicity and simplicity.

The next step was a *churrasco* food truck to grill beef Brazilian style. They catered weddings and offered drink/barbecue pairing courses.

The couple was out and about regularly, but fans wanted more. Popular demand grew for a regular location and hours. So, Chicago

Beef, you are not going to end with a great product. You can't take crap and try and dress it up and then have a five-star dinner."

It's in the feeling, too.

"That marbling is what's going to help you, help make the moisture, and help with the scrumptiousness of it," she adds. "You get that fat on your lips, and you can just kind of feel that goodness."

They have nine items on their regular menu, but every week, there's something new.

Creative culinary

"That's where I get to come in," says Greg, who is creative with his culinary ideas.

"We do some crazy stuff sometimes," — using everything from tongue to the tail to the shanks — "but I think that's something that the customers really like. They know that we do everything really well," Kristina says. "So if it's something that they haven't tried or they're unsure of, they're usually not so afraid to try it, because they know that Greg and I are going to pour our heart and souls into that and present them a delicious, great product."

It goes beyond the product, though. It's about sharing the meal.

"We've got a lot of people who come almost every Saturday and Sunday, or at least once a weekend," Kristina says. "You learn about them. You learn their names. You learn their faces. You hear them talk about their kids, their favorite food. It's family, just like the ranchers at *Certified Angus Beef* that we've become part of. It's just another extension of our family."

Due to COVID-19, weekend gatherings at Chicago Culinary Kitchen were not the same this



Family is at the center of Chicago Culinary Kitchen, but it's also why Greg and Kristina like being part of something bigger. "Besides my own family, I would call CAB the second family I never had," says Greg, pictured here with the brand's culinary team and other guest chefs at the CAB Annual Conference in 2019.

spring. The Gaardbos credit their business model for saving their kitchen. They remained open during quarantine and offered carryout.

No one was laid off, but many catering events scheduled for this year were either canceled or postponed to next year. They've been running their food truck to make up for the lost revenue.

"We just want to be that light at the end of the tunnel for some of our customers who still come out and are waiting outside before we open," Kristina says. "Even though you can't see their smiling faces you can still see their eyes, their little crow's wrinkles when you know they're smiling under their mask. Just being able to check in on everyone's mental well-being going on through all of this."

They'll continue to check in on family at a new location, possibly by early fall.

The new storefront just two miles away will put them in front of 65,000 cars a day with room for outdoor seating, pairing courses and the catering enterprise. The former location will transition to feature Mexican food under the Chicago Culinary Kitchen umbrella.

Every step has made them stronger, together.

"We live together, we work together, we play together," says Kristina. "It's allowed us to grow together. A lot of these couples you see, they only see each other maybe for a few minutes in the morning before they split to go off to separate works, and then they see each other in the evening when they've got to take care of their kids with homework and stuff like that. We've really been able to spend a lot of time together, developing our relationship, our businesses as best friends, as partners and as a married couple. It's awesome."

Together, they're proud of the way they work as a couple in this hustle to be innovative and keep reinventing themselves.

It's how they relate to cattlemen.

"We strive for greatness in everything we do, and that's really what the ranchers of CAB are doing," says Kristina. "It's a union of both of us that makes this work."

It's what makes their whole family work. **AJ**

Editor's note: Abbie Burnett is a producer communications specialist for CAB.