

A Winning Combination

Western tradition with today's best beef spells success for The Rex.

by *Miranda Reiman*

Riding into Billings, Mont., late at night, it is said that William "Buffalo Bill" Cody would break into The Rex Corral Café, then eat and drink to his heart's content. He'd leave money on the large oak inlaid bar and be on his way.

That was just fine with Rex owner Alfred Heimer. After all, he was Cody's former chef and had the legend to thank for his start in the booming Western town.

The establishment at 2401 Montana St., built in 1910, was once frequented by the likes of Cody, Calamity Jane and author Will James. Its location in the heart of downtown Billings, directly across from the train station, made it a popular spot through the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

"It's like rock stars nowadays; that's kind of how Cody was back then," Gene Burgad, manager, says.

Burgad's story shares some similarities to that of the original Rex owner. Burgad also worked his way up to owning a restaurant, using early jobs to learn the ropes.

"I knew about restaurants because I had worked in various facets of restaurants," he says. From dishwasher and cook, to waiter and bartender, he gained experience in the foodservice business. An avid pool player, Burgad's goal wasn't always to co-own and manage one of the better-known steakhouses in Billings.

"I ran a pool hall for years," he says. "I knew it was a little bit better career path on the restaurant side than being a pool player."

Burgad and business partner John Purcell have owned the restaurant now known as The Rex for 23 years.

Consistency needed

During its 97-year history, the establishment has seen many changes, including a saving-grace reprieve from a date with a wrecking ball in the 1970s. Quality food and drink, the founding cornerstones of the historic eatery, still draw people from all

walks of life. The offerings include an extensive wine list, enticing appetizers and plenty of *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) steaks.

"We opened up with a menu from the place I ran before," Burgad says. "Since we opened, it has certainly evolved."

Under his direction they have added fresh seafood and pasta, but they have always continued their tradition of great beef.

In 1995, they became a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed restaurant, selling CAB prime rib and New York strip, ribeye, sirloin and porterhouse steaks. One customer's bad steak spurred Burgad to find CAB.

"I remember an incident where a man called me over with a complaint about the prime rib — it was a beautiful looking piece of rib," he says. "We took it to the back and it was tough; it was hard to cut. Sometimes you could cut it with a butter knife, and then other days it was less than great.

"We were selling Choice, and the consistency was suspect," Burgad says. "Although you're going to have to pay more for CAB, it is consistent. We know that the consistency and flavor profiles are going to be there. It's really top-quality."

CAB distributor Sysco-Montana reports The Rex is very successful at selling beef.

"They're probably in the top five of all my accounts for selling *Certified Angus Beef*," says Kim Warburton, premium protein brand manager for Sysco. "People go there for the steaks."

Famous or famished

The atmosphere doesn't hurt either. Walking into The Rex, diners are greeted by a scene out of an old West movie: Rich, inlaid and carved woodwork, beveled glass, Western paintings and an expansive bar.



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

▶ Gene Burgad, manager and co-owner of The Rex, says the CAB® brand has brought consistency to the restaurant's beef menu.

"You can always tell that everyone's having fun around there," Warburton says.

For more casual dining, the patio bar and grill was added on in 1998. It offers burgers, pizzas, soups and smaller steaks. Many restaurant-goers enjoy eating on the patio into the late fall, Burgad says. For that reason, outdoor area heaters mingle with the tables in cool weather.

"It's a varied clientele," Warburton says. "You'll see guys in cowboy hats and Wranglers® sitting next to guys in business suits. The guy in the business suit might be the rancher and the guy in Wranglers the banker."

Burgad has gotten to know some of the behind-the-scenes people in the beef industry.

"There's a lot of beef people that come in here, everything from the guys that own the auction yards to the guys that go to the yards," he says. "They've become friends over the years."

Although the clientele has changed from the wild and wooly days of Buffalo Bill, a celebrity might stop in every now and again. Clint Eastwood, a friend of the owners, came to Billings especially for the restaurant's grand re-opening in 1998.

Famous or famished, people who come to The Rex enjoy themselves and tell others.

"They do a wonderful job there," Warburton says. "I highly recommend them when anybody comes to town, and take a lot of people there for business dinners. When I bring all the food guys in, and that's where we want to go, it says something."