

► The ribbon-cutting ceremony at the CAB® Education & Culinary Center took place in February, with a grand opening following in May.



# Out-of-the-box Education

CAB's Education & Culinary Center set to inspire.

by *Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

The four walls of a cubicle can be so confining. Meat cutters hardly ever find their muse behind a desktop computer. Chefs rarely dole out their signature creativity while staring at presentation documents. Ranchers are no more inspired by sitting idly in a crowd.

That's why the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand doesn't park its partners in an office when they come into the corporate headquarters in Wooster, Ohio. Interactive education has always been a goal, from ranch and feedlot tours to carcass cuttings and retail visits. That just got easier to deliver, though, with the recent opening of the CAB Education & Culinary Center.

Envisioned as a business-to-business (B2B) space, the 7,000-square-foot completely remodeled, former restaurant is part research and development, part classroom, part entertainment venue. It is 100% about selling more of the world's

leading beef brand, says marketing director Deanna Walenciak.

"There's only so much we can learn from a PowerPoint slide, but when you can be hands-on, that's when people really get engaged in learning," she says. "That's the most exciting thing about the Education & Culinary Center: the areas that are designed to be interactive."

Anchoring the space is the kitchen, where chefs and beef experts can work side by side. The large island adjacent to the cooking area allows for audience participation.

"They can get up and cook and grill new cuts with us," Walenciak says. "We can try new products together. That's where we can really move the needle and get a lot of business done."

Tracing beef's journey backward, there's a meat fabrication area for hands-on butchery. Visitors can break down a side of beef to better understand where cuts come



Deanna Walenciak

from or kick around new merchandising ideas.

"Our alternative before was one 6-foot table and some knives," says David O'Diam, assistant director of packing. "Now we have five 8-foot tables, a band saw, a dual-chamber vacuum packer, two grinders. It allows us to do so much more."

Customized audiovisual resources, like cameras on cutting tables that can project images for large groups, expand the versatility.

"Swinging beef" is sourced from just down the road at Ashland, Ohio, where the small, USDA-inspected Boliantz Packing plant was recently CAB-licensed.

"It's so important when we bring folks in who have no background in agriculture that



we can show them beef hanging on the rail,” O’Diam says. “We can actually show them where the rib is and tie that to the piece of meat they see in the box.”

The culinary center expanded CAB’s ability to do cross-sector education, but pillars of the original strategy remain.

### Visiting the farm

No words can replace the actual experience of seeing cattle firsthand — watching them roam the pasture or eat out of the feedbunk. That’s why the company regularly takes visiting sales partners on field trips to Rod and Laurie Ferguson’s Chippewa Valley Angus at nearby Rittman, or to the Ohio State University’s for-profit working farm, part of the Wooster-based Agriculture Technical Institute (ATI).

“The more our licensees know about the production side of the beef business, the better it will make them at selling and marketing that product,” says Margaret Coleman, CAB assistant director of education.

At the ATI beef facility, they learn what happens from conception to the packinghouse. Manager Casey Meek typically leads the tours, explaining the beef industry in easy-to-understand terms.

“A lot of people who come out understand the end part of it — the cooking, the cutting, the meat — but they don’t understand what goes on before that,” he says. “It’s a neat time because they can ask a lot of questions. We can show them all the good things that happen on a farm.”

When the guests leave either cattle-centric location, the consensus is usually “mission accomplished.”

“They always comment on getting that personal connection with a cowboy,” he says. “They get a better understanding of what production is really like and the care that



► The Chamber of Commerce for Wooster, Ohio, and couple hundred friends celebrated the ribbon-cutting at the CAB Education & Culinary Center.

farmers and ranchers have for their livestock. That’s really important.”

Walenciak says that’s a pillar of the brand’s unique position in the marketplace.

“We’re more than just one aspect of the industry,” she says. Perhaps as a testament to that, the CAB minivans crisscross Wooster so visitors can also see marketing in action at local restaurants and retailers.

“It allows us to tell a much larger story than just our corporate office,” Walenciak says. “While we have a lot of experts in-house, we are not the experts in everything. We have the pleasure of working with so many experts in the industry.

“We’re connecting the dots, connecting people and sharing ideas,” she says.

### Working together

Dave Savidge, director of meat

merchandising at Buehler’s Fresh Foods, enjoys showcasing his stores.

“We try to do our very best to implement every idea,” he says. “That way when people do come in from outside, they get firsthand experience of all CAB has to offer.”

The 13-store, Wooster-based chain readily opens its doors for tour groups, and Savidge says his crew is always ready for guests.

“They’re doing their best whether there’s a group coming or not,” he says. “They’re worried about the customer coming through the front door, so they bring 100% every day.”

Savidge often serves as an informal brand ambassador during one-on-one meetings.

“We become stronger if we all work together,” he says. “If CAB brings non-licensed retailers out, I’ll meet with them to tell them the truth about CAB. It’s not like

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► Above: “We become stronger if we all work together,” says Dave Savidge, director of meat merchandising at Buehler’s Fresh Foods. “If CAB brings non-licensed retailers out, I’ll meet with them to tell them the truth about CAB. It’s not like any other brand.”

► Left: “They always comment on getting that personal connection with a cowboy,” ATI beef facility manger Casey Meek says. “They get a better understanding of what production is really like and the care that farmers and ranchers have for their livestock.”

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any other brand. I'm able to give them that I'm-living-it perspective."

Visitors can learn from the executive chef and owner at the Wooster Inn, a local fine-dining restaurant, too. They are set up to serve large groups in their main dining room, and they welcome fellow chefs and foodservice professionals.

"I don't have any secrets. I'm in the teaching phase of my career," says 33-year industry veteran Ken Bogucki.

In 2003, the restaurant became his "turnaround" project. He bought the business and licensed with CAB a few years later, citing the consistency the product brings to his upscale country menu.

Showcasing beef is especially fulfilling when cattlemen walk through his doors.

"I probably have the same passion for this business. I love what I do," Bogucki says. "I'm pretty lucky that way, and I'm proud of what the Inn has become over time."

That's a contagious feeling one can only get by being there in person.

"How many other brands bring all these segments together?" Walenciak asks. "We can tour Buehler's and show them how great partners market the brand. We can dine at

the Wooster Inn and experience the culinary creativity there. And we can take them out to the farm so they can get a little mud on their boots."

### Homecourt advantage

Regional, on-location seminars and tours continue, but Walenciak says there are efficiencies in bringing big events like the International Roundup seminar in-house.

"If we get a model and it works well, we can repeat it more easily," she says. "Plus, we can bring in more of our staff than if we were traveling to a university. We get the expertise of more people, a bigger team, so hopefully we can provide more value to our customers."

The businesses also see advantages in getting a fresh perspective that comes with a change of scenery.

"There's so much power in bringing them here to our facility," Walenciak says. "There's something about when they're outside of their daily building, they can be a lot more focused on beef. That allows them to really get excited and immersed in what they're doing."

Savidge already used the center to host cutting trainings for his meat managers.

"We have a large area, but this facility is set up so that if you have 13 meat managers standing around the cutting table, you can all see," he says. "We would have done this in one of our stores, but this way we don't have the customers ringing the bell. It's more of a training setting."

Besides local and national grand-opening events, the center has already featured trainings for the likes of Buehler's, marketing meetings for other partners, one-on-one recipe creation for chefs like Ric Rosser of Saltgrass Steak House, and guests from across the United States and 11 other countries.

Walenciak says that's just the beginning. The goal is not about who they get into Wooster, but what ideas come out of there.

"That's what makes this so different than what we could do in our office before. We just didn't have the space or ability to be hands-on," she says. "By being interactive and hands-on, we get creativity flowing."

Who wouldn't be more inspired with the scent of beef on the grill wafting through the air?



**Editor's Note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*