

## A day in the life of a



# Kansas City Chef

For Chef Zac Alft, success hinges on processes, parameters and preparation.

Story & photos by **Bryan Schaaf**, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)

**T**here will come a day when Zac Alft looks back upon this time of his life in astonishment.

His kids will be grown. His nerves will be calm. His hands will be littered with scars and scrapes and burns that never did quite heal the way they were supposed to.

The nightly sprint through marathon dinner service after marathon dinner

service will have slowed, and he won't quite comprehend what happened to the last 30 years of his life.

But for now, the 27-year-old chef dynamo doesn't have time to look that far into the future. His six kitchen concepts in Kansas City's Live Block of the ultra hip Power & Light District, along with another handful of dining hotspots in Louisville and

Baltimore, ensure that every day will be an adventure.

### **Calm before the storm**

The date had been circled on his calendar for some time: April 13. Bon Jovi. Sprint Center.

A sellout crowd at the nearby Sprint

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### **A day in the life ...**

It takes a heap of work, coordination and planning to get a tasty steak from pasture to plate. In honor of National Beef Month in May, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) decided to check in with the people who devote their life's work to providing, cooking and delivering the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand to tables around the world.

CAB staff shadowed professionals in various segments of the beef industry, walking in their shoes for a day. They shared their experiences with readers throughout the month on [www.gorare.com](http://www.gorare.com)

and [www.blackinkwithcab.com](http://www.blackinkwithcab.com), CAB's foodie consumer blog and beef production blog, respectively.

With so many segments in the industry, the blog series helps connect the dots from farm to fork. We share some of those insights in this series prepared for the *Angus Journal*, beginning with this feature on Chef Zac Alft. In September, we will bring you a day in the life of a retail meat cutter.

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Center is nothing Alft and his crews haven't seen before. However, Jon Bon Jovi, and the assumed age demographic he would bring to the district, would surely be a boon for business, particularly at Maker's Mark Bourbon House & Lounge, a swanky, fine-dining anchor that hangs its hat on some of the most incredible cuisine you'll find in Kansas City.

Alft, and his trusted right-hand man at Maker's, Chef Derek Kieffaber, were more than ready.

"There are things that, if you wait until you need them to prep, forget it," Alft says. "All these guys know that. This kitchen can handle anything that comes, as long as we've done all the prep work ahead of time."

Adding to the busy night, Alft has been charged with overseeing a 400-person, \$250-a-plate seated dinner just up the street at one of his newest spaces, The Gallery, as part of a fundraising gala.

In just eight hours time, Alft will be entertaining some of Kansas City's elite socialites, but he begins the day behind a blistering pizza oven with a large group of 10-year-olds. It's his son's end-of-the-season wrestling team get-together.

Outside, the KC Live Block played host to a few tourist groups. Across the way, Chef Derek and his staff were busy shucking oysters and making sauces by the gallon in anticipation.

After a quick stop in the kitchen of Maker's Mark, Alft headed to the Gallery. There, his kitchen team was busy making final preparations ahead of their dinner, which included 360 pepper-crusted *Certified Angus*

*Beef*® (CAB®) filet mignon steaks.

### Going gardening

Just after 3:30 p.m., his phone buzzed. At McFadden's, one of his other restaurants, the sunny, 72° F weather brought patrons in early.

The kitchen was staffed only to handle a typical casual Saturday afternoon. After running at a feverish pace for nearly an hour, Alft arrived and stepped onto the line to expedite orders.

"My management style is that I need to be able to do everybody's job that I supervise better than they can," he said. "I should be able to step in on the line at any kitchen and make things right."

But on this day, Alft's expertise could only paper over the cracks. When he realized that his staff had no more dishes left on which to serve food, he was forced to make the decision to briefly suspend foodservice until his team could recover.

"A lot of times I'm able to step in and relieve some of the pressure. There was no catching up today," he said.

### Filet fires

It was nearing 6 p.m. and there was not a seat to be found at Maker's Mark, which had opened its private dining areas to the public to accommodate upward of 250 seats. With the Bon Jovi show kicking off by 7:30, this was running exactly how Alft and Kieffaber had planned.

Despite the packed dining room, the kitchen, though hectic, is orderly and at ease.

It's 6:15 when Alft arrives back at the Gallery, and plans immediately hit a snag.

The 360 pepper-crusted filets were scheduled to be "fired," or cooked, at 5:45 to a rare degree of doneness. From there, they'd be placed in a heating box for the next 60 minutes or so, at which time they'd be a perfect medium-rare.



► There is no "typical" day in the life of Kansas City Chef Zac Alft. Rather, being a chef is about processes, parameters and preparation.

Half an hour later, they were still occupying the rack outside the oven, uncooked.

But Alft, whose demeanor in the kitchen is more Galloping Gourmet than Gordon Ramsay, took it in stride. He quickly placed the filets in the oven, but adjusted the cooking time to bring them up to the higher degree of doneness. From there, he and staff set about prepping and plating 400 salads and another 400 entrées.

In less than an hour, the 12-person team plated more than 800 individual dishes,



► The 360 pepper-crusted filets stand ready to "fire" for a \$250-a-plate seated dinner at The Gallery.





including an additional 72 dessert trays with assorted handmade pastries and fruits.

By 9 p.m., the dining room was filled with elegant music, low lighting and a relaxed atmosphere completely removed from the backroom chaos. Diners casually chatted about the day, and, of course, the meal, which received rave reviews.

Nearly three hours after they were cooked, Alft finally cut into one of the extra steaks. The result? Medium-rare. Perfect.

### Grill marks

While his kitchen staff at the Gallery drew a breath, Alft headed back up the street to Maker's Mark. By now, the restaurant crowd had thinned, with many of its patrons getting their fix of Jon Bon Jovi and Richie Sambora.

Now it was time to regroup for Round 2.

The show let out, and around 10:15, orders started coming. As fast as before, burgers,

hummus plates, dessert trays, flat breads and the occasional steak were cooked, plated and presented.

It would be one final test for Alft, who by now was far removed from the morning that started behind a pizza inferno.

So what does a typical day in the life of a chef look like? Most will say there is no such thing.

Rather, being a chef is about processes, parameters and preparation. It's about surrounding yourself with people, who, in the face of whatever chaos may come your way, are going to do what's best for the customer.

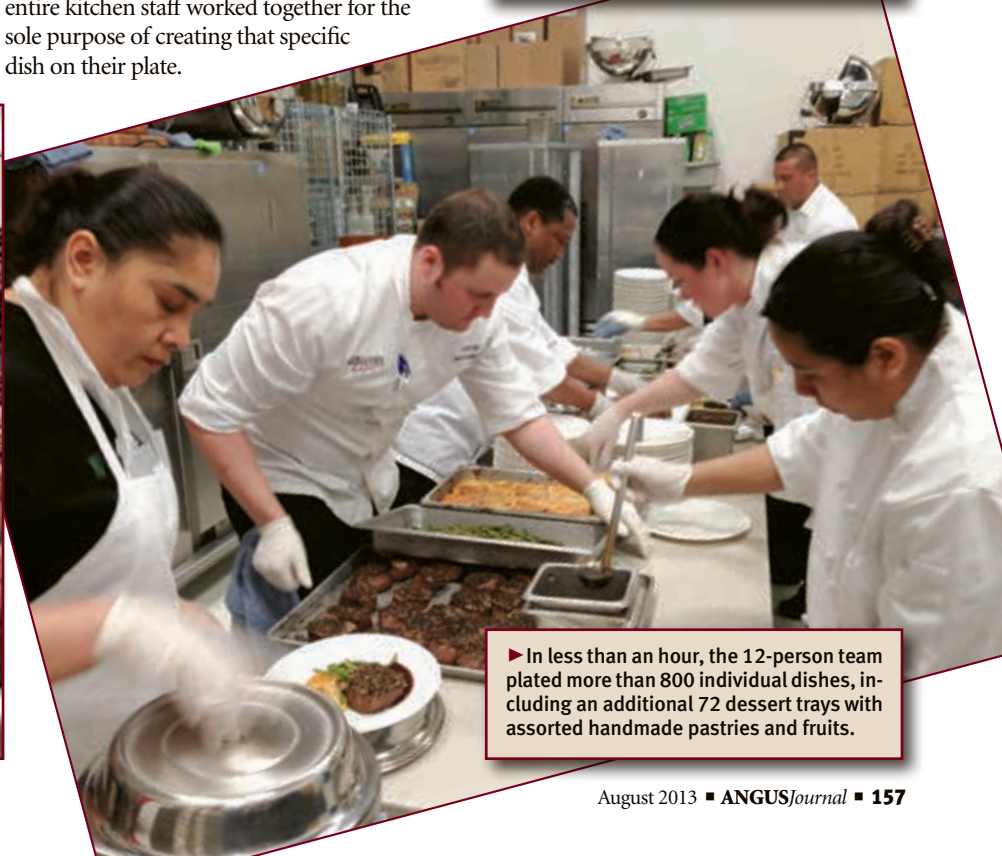
It's about taking all those ingredients and putting them into a package that, no matter the pitfalls and curveballs, is presented to diners in a manner that makes them think an entire kitchen staff worked together for the sole purpose of creating that specific dish on their plate.

Tomorrow, Zac Alft will get out of bed and hit the ground running once again. Although there will be different names, faces and chaos for which to account, the end goal will stay the same: Make good food. Please your customers. Time and time again.

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**Editor's Note:** Bryan Schaaf is media and communications manager for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). This article is the first of a "Day in the Life" series of three.

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