

'Fast' Food Goes the Distance

One CAB partner takes the brand on a Food Network adventure.

by **Miranda Reiman**



Mobile foodservice isn't new to the Midwest. More than a century ago, chuckwagons crisscrossed the Great Plains. Those sturdy, repurposed wagons carried food and all the supplies needed to make it from location to location along the cattle drives.

Although the landscape has changed and the necessity of having a diner on wheels isn't what it once was, they still hold a little bit of nostalgia — like the first ice cream trucks of the 1950s — and a trendy new twist on gourmet food on the go.

That's where the Hodge Podge Truck, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensee, fits in.

The Cleveland, Ohio-based food truck is the creation of Chris Hodgson, a classically trained chef who decided to bring the concept, popular on the East and West Coasts, back to his hometown on the North Coast a few years ago.

"Most young people are going out of Cleveland and moving to find jobs," he says. "Instead of that, I decided to come back and bring something new. I wanted to bring some life back into the city streets of Cleveland."

Hodgson not only did that, but this fall helped shine a spotlight on his venture and his roots as a contestant in the Food Network's *Great Food Truck Race*. The show pitted eight three-person teams against each other as they traveled from city to city vying for the \$100,000 grand prize. The team making the lowest profit at each stop was eliminated.

"This was a chance for us to represent ourselves, our business and where we're from," says Hodgson, who competed with his sister Catie Hodgson and long-term

girlfriend Jacquelyn Romanin working alongside him.

Common connection

He also carried the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand from Las Vegas to Miami.

"There is sort of this edgy thing about ordering off a truck, but when people see

trusted names that they've seen for years and years, they're more likely to visit you because they know your product," he says.

It also gave Hodgson a "brotherhood" of chefs to rely on when sourcing beef in each new city.

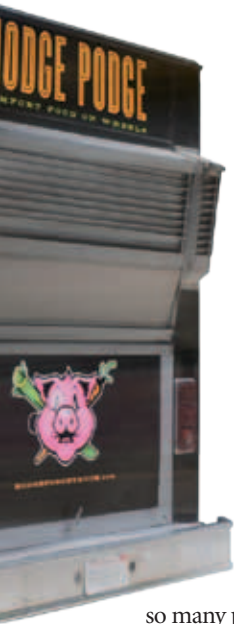
"We kind of had this connection between these restaurants that wanted to help and



▶ **Above:** Chris Hodgson (left), a classically trained chef, decided to bring the concept of the food truck popular on the East and West Coasts back to his hometown on the North Coast.

▶ **Left:** On the road, Hodge Podge served everything from tuna tartare and crab dip to sweet potato tots and grilled cheese, but one entrée remained on their menu boards for the entire trip: CAB ribeye tacos.

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give back to their own kind," he says. "It's a big family across the U.S. — restaurants, grocery stores, ranchers. It's a supportive community that CAB has created."

One stop took them right to the heart of cattle country: Manhattan, Kan. It was graduation weekend at Kansas State University (K-State), and the crowds were supportive.

"Kansas was the greatest because we had so many people coming from farms and ranches wanting to buy just tons and tons of food," he says. "There were so many people excited about it!"

There, demand was so hot that Hodge Podge ran out of the CAB burgers, twice.

Listening to customers

"We tried creating stuff that we knew people in the next town would enjoy. We played to the location we were at," Hodgson says. That's always been a theme.

"It's not about what I want to make; it's what people want to eat," he says with typical energy. "I use social media to its fullest capacity."

He listens to his Twitter and Facebook followers, which, when combined, number almost 10,000 people. Social networking helped loyal fans spread the word about his participation in the Food Network show, where he made it all the way to the final episode. The truck came in second to its California-based competitors, The Lime Truck.

"Working around the country with all

these different kinds of people was awesome," he says. "It was a cool opportunity to have my sister and my girlfriend there with me, driving a big old truck across America."

On the road, Hodge Podge served everything from tuna tartare and crab dip to sweet potato tots and grilled cheese, but one entrée remained on their menu boards for the entire trip.

"*Certified Angus Beef* ribeye tacos," Hodgson says emphatically.

That might have something to do with where the whole idea originated. He was a chef in New York City when he and his buddies frequently visited the city's taco trucks.

"One night we were out and talking about who would have the better food truck, and I ended up deciding to put in my notice and go and get one," he says. Since then he

has helped set the scene for food trucks in Cleveland, even helping the city write codes.

"Chris has always been a people person," says his dad, John Hodgson. "He's always been the life of the party, the person everyone wants to be around. He just loves interacting with people, so with that and his passion for food, he wants to offer top-quality, gourmet items at an economical price."

A food truck has the advantage of less overhead than a traditional restaurant, but that also means people are expecting more for their dollar.

"We're known for our quality and our size. We have delicious food and huge portions," he says. "We're just very passionate about what we do, and we're able to do it cheaper than restaurants."

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► Hodgson helped shine a spotlight on his venture, his roots and the CAB® brand, entering the Hodge Podge Truck in the Food Network's *Great Food Truck Race*. In Manhattan, Kan., during graduation weekend at K-State, folks lined up for CAB burgers. Hodge Podge ran out of the CAB burgers twice.