



► **Left:** Whether he's feeding cattle or customers, Steve Roberts applies the same dedication and passion for the two aspects of his life that have deep roots in McConnellsville.

He began that career at a Pizza Hut in northeast Ohio, then on to work and train staff for the likes of Pillsbury, Bakers Square and Olive Garden. City living went with those jobs: seven years in the Los Angeles area, and years in Chicago, Indianapolis, Columbus and Cleveland. Finally, he was home in the community that always felt like home, where he still knows folks who knew his parents.

As the foodservice career was beginning, the farm family got into registered Angus cattle with a dozen heifers in the 1970s. The historic barn with its 48-foot hewn oak beams cut from the Roberts farm in the late 1890s was made for dairying, but after that business was dispersed in the 1960s, it was time for a new type of cattle. "My brother joined my father at that time," says Roberts. "Mike was really the driver of the registered Angus."

In fact, he drove all the way to a reputation herd of 200 cows and a long list of bull customers. As their father retired, the two brothers were partners in the cattle business in the 1990s. Though after battling lymphoma, Mike passed away in 2004 and the herd was partially dispersed.

Roberts is now the sole proprietor of the 40-cow seedstock herd and continues to manage Chatterbox Tavern, but he isn't really cutting back. Last December he and Wells expanded their customer base and opened Chatterbox Tavern II in nearby Beverly, Ohio, a 20-minute southbound drive from McConnellsville.

Tavern tales

The grand opening celebration there in

Chatting Up Both Sides

Ohioan knows the beef business from start to finish.

Story & photos by *Emily Krueger*

His day starts with morning chores. There may be salt or hay to put out, a fence and water to check. Then, changing out of his barn boots, he drives 10 or 15 minutes through the foothills of southeastern Ohio to a quaint restaurant in small-town McConnellsville. After a fresh cup of coffee and morning greetings, he is ready for the day.

Steve Roberts, registered Angus breeder and co-owner of Chatterbox Tavern, knows the beef industry from calving to cooking.

Whether he's feeding cattle or customers, Roberts applies the same dedication and passion for the two aspects of his life that have deep roots here.

The restaurant enterprise started 12 years ago when he and brother Mike partnered with friend and local attorney John Wells to purchase a tavern that had been serving customers for a century or more. Ironically, the old tavern was built about the same time that Roberts' great-great-grandfather was building the family's house and barn.

Roots in both fields

"At that time my brother ran the cattle for the most part, and I ran the restaurant," says Roberts. Doing so was an ultimate homecoming after many years in restaurant management and foodservice training across the United States.



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March set the business up to grow, with a staff of 43 following a recipe for success Roberts applies from his years of experience, but the new site enjoys extra advantages.

“There are a few things down here that will maybe help drive business,” he says. “There is a nice golf course and a motel.”

Breakfast is a recent addition to the Beverly restaurant’s menu, and a liquor license will make it one of only two such vendors in the township. “The golfers start coming in the first of April, hence the breakfast menu and hence we’re getting the alcohol license,” Roberts says. “There’s nothing like a nice New York strip and a good cabernet, from my perspective.”

The two taverns are siblings, yet like brothers, they are unique. The original tavern has an established “home-style atmosphere.” The charming dining area is dimly lit, with corner booths, wooden tables, booster seats and bar stools, catering to both family meals and the occasional evening beverage.

Roberts says Chatterbox Tavern II is still “in that embryo stage” of identity, but its design portrays an old-style tavern, complete with high-top booths and a tin-looking wainscoting. “Really, this is my brother’s vision, not only selling a quality steak, but the old décor, too,” he says.

Regardless of their distinct dining atmospheres, both sites are 100% licensed *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand partners. That CAB logo is one of the first things customers see as they enter either restaurant.

“Steve talks very passionately about the brand, the Angus cattle, the ranch — he’s not only a grower, but also a restaurateur who serves the product,” says Chad Metzger, Cleveland Sysco CAB specialist who works closely with Roberts as a distributor and informal consultant.

“He does not waiver at all on what he’s doing and what he’s serving. Ever,” Metzger says.

Well, of course, Roberts’ approving smile agrees: “Becoming a licensed CAB partner was the best decision we ever made. And it’s not just a marketing tool.”

The consistent quality of the brand has saved him a great deal of money, for one thing. For the first few years in business, steaks were an afterthought and Roberts would just buy a few at the grocery store. That began to clash with his guaranteed-satisfaction commitment. “We got tired of buying steaks!

“I can tell you that 90% of the time, if we have a problem now, it’s because of preparation or a miscommunication. In the seven years we’ve had *Certified Angus Beef*, customers have been satisfied with their

Roberts’ rules for success

There are five things you must do as a restaurateur:

- ▶ You must serve quality food.
- ▶ You must have good service.
- ▶ You must have a clean environment.
- ▶ You must have fair prices.
- ▶ You must know your customers, from names to menu preferences.

“Within the premises of any restaurant I’ve worked with, if you don’t do those five things, you’re not going to be successful,” says Steve Roberts, *McConnellsville, Ohio, manager of the Certified Angus Beef*®-licensed Chatterbox Taverns and Angus seedstock producer.

orders, and I probably haven’t bought back more than eight or nine steaks,” he says.

The Angus angle

Raising Angus cattle and using CAB product in his restaurants gives Roberts a comprehensive perspective of the brand that Metzger appreciates, once musing to his friend, “I wish I could clone you and keep you for while we’re talking to other customers about CAB.”

“He’s seen CAB perform; he knows what it’s about.” If other foodservice customers could interact with Roberts, Metzger says, “they could understand the passion, the dedication and the belief he has in the product.”

Managing two restaurants and the



▶ Last December Roberts (left) and local attorney John Wells expanded their customer base and opened Chatterbox Tavern II in nearby Beverly, Ohio.

seedstock operation keeps Roberts constantly on the move, even though “I’ve backed down to 40 head,” he says. Regardless of scale, he remains committed to breeding for quality, and there are parallels between the farm and food businesses.

“We are constantly looking at staying consistent,” Roberts says. He breeds for weaning weights of 600 to 700 pounds (lb.), with cow mature weights near 1,300 lb. His operation focuses on “low-stress management and handling of cattle,” and cows with attitude are sure to be culled without a second thought.

He values the ladies in the herd, and retains most heifers for breeding. But that’s just half of the two-sided equation, and a great deal of time and consideration goes into choosing herd sires, as well. Mike started using Whitestone and Wehrmann Angus genetics, and Roberts continues to feature the Wehrmann lines, which he says excel in trait consistency among the offspring.

Similar to Chatterbox Tavern, he has loyal customers in his cattle business.

“My brother and I developed a real sound buying group, a lot of commercial breeders and some registered breeders,” he says.

Metzger says Sysco Cleveland receives consistent weekly orders of beef for both taverns, and Roberts “really strives to find items that move.” The restaurants use an assortment of CAB products on a regular basis, including the New York strip, ribeye, sirloin steak, corned beef and braised short ribs. All of the taverns’ burgers are CAB, and occasionally “underutilized cuts” are featured on the menu.

“He’s really good about using different cuts and things he thinks a customer in that area will really like,” Metzger says.

Accumulated years in the restaurant industry have made Roberts success savvy, and he can enumerate what must be done (see “Roberts’ rules for success”). The fifth element, knowing the customers, is a real strength as one might expect in the small-town environments.

“My management team is really good about knowing their repeat customers — first name, last name and knowing what someone drinks,” he says.

Whether he’s choosing the next line of genetics for his Angus herd or deciding which CAB cut to feature, Roberts knows beef. He may change out of his barn boots when he leaves the farm in the morning, but his beliefs about the quality of CAB never change.

“It doesn’t take you long to realize he really gets it,” Metzger says.



Editor’s Note: Emily Krueger is the marketing specialist for *Certified Angus Beef* LLC.