



# Star Power

## CAB provides 'license to thrill' for Wood Ranch.

Story & photos by **Larry Stalcup**

It's not just sushi and salad on this Tinseltown restaurant menu. In fact, some beef lovers in southern California would likely give steaks from Wood Ranch BBQ and Grill a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

This chain of 13 area restaurants has long been known as a barbecue king. But Wood

Ranch credits much of its success to the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand it serves.

"CAB is immensely important to us," says Alejandro "Alex" Benes, a partner in the 16-year-old business.

From mini-cheeseburger appetizers to its "Buckeye Burger," New York strips, ribeyes, filets and racks of prime rib, the brand's menu items keep the white oak and mesquite-burning grills smokin'.

Headquartered in Agoura Hills, just east of Malibu, Calif., Wood Ranch was developed and run by veteran restaurateurs Eric Anders and Ofer Shemtov. Benes invested in the company in the mid-1990s after leaving a career in broadcast journalism and international marketing.

With a little showbiz in his blood, Benes quickly acquired a taste for marketing what Wood

Ranch had to offer. He saw the potential to reach out to a mostly upscale market of 25 million residents and tourists.

"*Certified Angus Beef* burgers, steaks and prime rib are as important as anything we have on the menu," Benes says. "We value the brand because our customers do; it's broadly marketed in grocery stores and restaurants across southern California."

Wood Ranch is one of more than 15,000 CAB licensees in 46 countries, each participating in the pull-through demand system. The signals call for more top-quality beef.

Producers whose cattle answer the call are rewarded with an estimated \$25 million per year for the CAB portion of grid premiums, to say nothing of the Choice, Prime and Yield Grade components. Wood Ranch customers are happy to add their dollar signals.

Barb Burd, CAB sales marketing manager, praises the California chain. "We love their commitment," she says. "Wood Ranch advertises the brand to help set themselves apart from their competition. They do an



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excellent job of identifying the CAB brand on their menu.”

Benes regularly attends annual CAB conferences. “The value to me is being able to communicate with people in the CAB organization and with producers,” he says. Rarely missing an opportunity to promote high-quality beef, Benes was a Cattlemen’s College® speaker in 2008 at the National Cattleman’s Beef Association (NCBA) convention in Reno, Nev.

He makes sure every Wood Ranch employee knows the benefits in every CAB cut. “Education and training are part of the program for everyone on our team,” Benes says. “Our employees are schooled on the value of quality in what we receive from our CAB supplier and what we serve to our customers.”

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The supplier is Newport Meat Co. of Irvine, Calif., the West’s largest distributor for the brand and the nation’s largest CAB specialty meat supplier. Mike Drury, Newport senior vice president, says Wood Ranch goes further than many restaurants in its training program.

“They bring their kitchen managers and front-of-the-house employees to our facilities and incorporate the beef they serve into their training program,” he says. “We explain how *Certified Angus Beef* is the highest quality out there, the cuts they’ll be serving and the best ways to prepare them.”

The training pays off, Benes says. “We make sure our cooks and grill staff know not to over-cook steaks. That’s a mistake some restaurants make in their beef preparation,” he notes. “We make sure our staff

knows what our customers expect when they order a CAB ribeye or prime rib.”

#### **A California menu**

The Wood Ranch menu carries the trademarked slogan, “The Food That Makes America Great!™” Along with beef, it includes a variety of salads, pasta, chicken and seafood.

“I mean, this is California,” explains Benes, referring to menu items that appeal to those who may not appreciate the health values of beef, or prefer a veggie diet.

But CAB products are always in high demand at each of the restaurants. Customers consider a Wood Ranch ribeye as a meal comparable to a high-end steak house at half the cost.

“Our guests can enjoy a 15-ounce ribeye or prime rib, a salad, a side dish and rolls for about \$28,” Benes says. “And we’re happy to compare that meal to one at a white-tablecloth restaurant that would cost them \$45.

“It’s a good value to steak lovers, especially those who like consistency in their beef and know they will get a tender, juicy, tasty steak,” he says. “First-time guests are often surprised at the quality they receive at the lower price.”

Because portions are large, many regulars split a ribeye or prime rib. “With CAB, we can provide value as well as consistency,” Benes says. “And in this (Los Angeles) market, you die if you can’t deliver what the customer wants in a good steak.”

The menu’s barbecue items include traditional “California” tri-tip, a roast that sits at the bottom of the sirloin.

“We tried CAB tri-tips, but they were just too tender for how these are prepared,” he notes. “But customers know that if they want a higher-quality beef meal, they go for our CAB brand cuts.”

Catering is another Wood Ranch enterprise, and quality is central to each buffet layout. “We offer the prime rib along with salmon on one of our packages,” Benes says. “Again, consistency is a must for catered events where quality is expected.”

#### **Carcass selection**

The consistency is enhanced by the product delivered by Newport Meat Co.

“Wood Ranch is very particular,” Drury says. “We acquire a selection of CAB product that enables us to cut the thick steaks they want. We go for beef from lighter cattle that produce a CAB carcass in the 750-pound (lb.) range. That translates into a thicker ribeye or strip steak.

“So, while only 8% of all beef has the marbling and other qualities that qualify it for the brand,” Drury says, “we look at a much smaller portion of the CAB supply that actually meets the Wood Ranch specifications. We have to work harder to select this beef for them.”

The cattle typically are harvested at a Midwestern plant, and the beef is aged 28 days or longer.

“That process really shows up in the taste and tenderness of our steaks,” Benes says, adding that the filet “sells the most.”

But the burgers also win rave Hollywood reviews. “Like our steaks, the CAB ‘Buckeye’ burger — with its signature barbecue sauce and applewood-smoked bacon — and the classic burger are popular menu items that bring customers back,” he says.

Restaurant locations are in both the suburbs and high-rent districts. “Our Hollywood location is an area where there are more than 20 million visitors a year,” Benes says. “We must serve a quality product. You can’t survive paying those types of rents if your product is not consistent.”

Burd says CAB training for Benes and his restaurant managers will likely include visiting an area Angus ranch.

“They’re a fantastic partner for us,” she adds. “We want to give them an intensive, inside look at a working ranch, an important part of how our *Certified Angus Beef* brand production cycle operates.”

And Benes wants to return the favor. “I invite CAB producers and feeders to call us when they’re in southern California,” he says. To plan ahead, you can visit them on the web at [www.woodranch.com](http://www.woodranch.com).

It will be a great chance to savor a strip steak near the Sunset Strip.

