

# Spotlight on The Cellar

Nebraska bar and grill is famous for onion rings and the best beef for miles around.

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Nearly every day you could find Mike Hendrickson at the same local hangout for lunch. The Cellar Bar and Grill, in Kearney, Neb., provided a respite from his job as an electrical engineer.

He doesn't know if it was the comfort food or a sympathetic ear behind the bar, but he says he bought the restaurant on a whim.

"I was having a bad day, and the owners were having a bad day, and the next thing I knew, I was buying the place," he says.

The Cellar had been a local favorite since 1978, so when Hendrickson bought it in 2004, he didn't make any drastic changes. At least not right away.

## Quality food

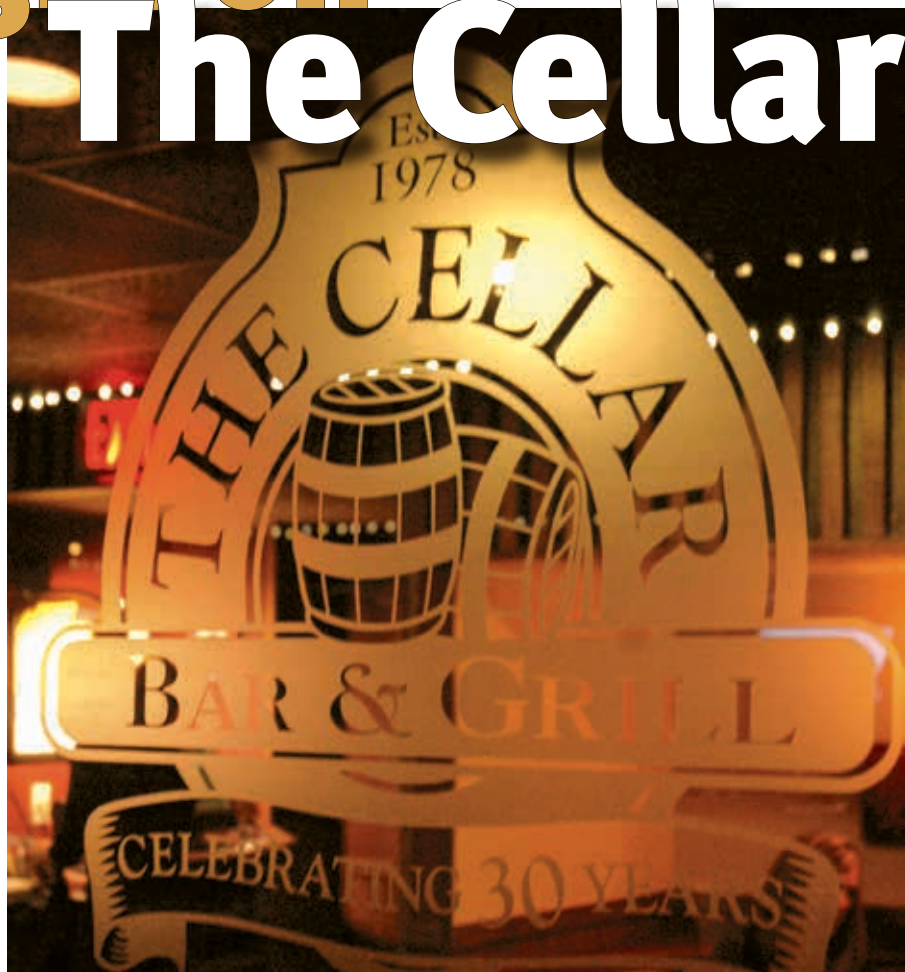
Stepping into the dimly lit basement dining room, especially when coming in from a sunny day, the name seems fitting. It takes your eyes a moment to adjust. Once they do, the décor is nice — earthy colors, brick accents, spacious booths and tables — but that's not what draws people from 100-150 miles around and keeps them patiently waiting in the crowded entryway during a Saturday-night rush.

"I don't want to be every other restaurant," says Hendrickson. The sure way he's found to differentiate is food. "You want to serve a product that your employees and regulars want to eat."

Ensuring their dishes would always take center stage, Hendrickson became licensed to serve *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand products in 2007.

"We don't comp meals because of the quality of the product," he says. "If you look at a ticket and there was a problem on it, you know it wasn't the beef."

Director of Operations Stacey Plautz adds,



► **Left:** Local Mike Hendrickson bought The Cellar Bar and Grill on a whim in 2004. Stacey Plautz joined the team in 2007 as director of operations.

everything from marketing and advertising to lunch specials and menu ideation.

Pick any weekday and the dining room is full to its 180-seat capacity during the lunch hour. Tuesday night's customers clamor for the sirloin special, and Prime Rib is a popular draw on Fridays and Saturdays.

Lunch specials are priced at \$8.99 and under, and rotate with the seasons. Once a year, the entire menu gets an overhaul.

"The chains do it multiple times a year, and we've got to stay fresh so we don't lose our customers to those chains," she says.

"We don't think twice when customers ask about our beef; we know that we offer a quality product that our servers can be proud to take to the table each and every time."

She left a corporate restaurant gig to join The Cellar team in 2007 and works on

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By training, there is no chef on staff. Rather, their cooks know how to grill.

“As long as our grill guy has his ‘A-game’ on, we’re not worried,” Hendrickson says. “Our customers want meat and potatoes and vegetables, and if you put anything else on there, they’re like, ‘Get it off!’”

He attributes that to the makeup of his clientele — area business people, families — heavily influenced by the local ag economy.

“When it rains, we call in extra help bright and early,” he says. Farmers are going to come to town, and when they do, chances are they’ll pick The Cellar.

### An award winner

That loyal base recently helped their most popular entrée, The Western Burger, take home the inaugural “2011 Nebraska’s Best Burger” title. Sponsored by the state’s beef council, the contest called for online submissions, and then a panel of judges selected the winner from a preliminary Top Five.

“We had buses come out with people from Omaha wanting to try that burger,” Plautz says. They sold 310 in one day.

The Western Burger is made with fresh-pattied CAB chuck, topped with American-Swiss cheese, bacon, barbecue sauce and their homemade onion ring.

It’s their top-seller, followed by the French dip, 6-oz. ribeye steak sandwich and sirloin. Overall, beef purchases make up 65%-70% of their sales in a year.

If people aren’t thinking beef when they hear “The Cellar,” then they’re probably already salivating over those onion rings. They sold more than 25,000 orders of them last year alone.

“If we’re out of onion rings, we have to put a sign on the door so people know before they’re seated,” Plautz says. “We don’t spend a lot of time trying to develop new appetizers, because there’s no reason to. They’re going to order onion rings.”

The wet-dry process takes three full days and employs one staff person for 40 hours each week.

“That’s all she does is make our onion rings. It is a family affair here at The Cellar, as her parents do all of our prep work. Our Mexican dishes, our pico de gallo, our soups, they are all homemade,” she says.

Evangelina Reyna comes in at 7 a.m. and slices onions until lunchtime, and then she breads them all afternoon.

She’s just one of a team that treats each other like family, Plautz says, which helps keep turnover to a minimum.



► The restaurant’s most popular entrée, The Western Burger, was named “2011 Nebraska’s Best Burger” by the state’s beef council. It’s made with fresh-pattied CAB chuck, topped with American-Swiss cheese, bacon, barbecue sauce and their homemade onion ring.

“I work very hard to keep it that way,” she says. Many servers and cooks grew up dining at The Cellar, and landed a job there while going to college just down the road at the University of Nebraska–Kearney.

### Packed house

Plautz credits a “very good team environment” for their ability to keep the waiting list moving on weekends, when the 10 × 5-foot kitchen is hopping to keep up.

The older building doesn’t allow for many renovations to add space. Even if it did, Hendrickson says, “I want to have a waiting list.”

Instead of expanding the restaurant, they’re growing the business through catering avenues, where Plautz is working to keep beef options top-of-mind.

“It might be easier to go with chicken because it’s easier to cater and cheaper,” she says, “but I’ve worked with our Sysco district sales rep on ideas, and we’ve been doing a lot of beef items. We are continually growing our catering options. If a customer wants it, we can do it.”

They do on-site catering and serve parties in their back room, which accommodates groups of up to 60 for events like rehearsal dinners and holiday celebrations.

Regardless of where the growth comes from, Plautz says it’ll always be driven by one factor.

“A lot of things around The Cellar are built on relationships, whether that’s with our distributor, our own staff or our customers,” she says. “Many of these people have come in for years, and now they have children and grandchildren. We’ve been able to establish a relationship with them, and we work hard to maintain and grow those relationships.”





## Brand ambassador

Hendrickson is strengthening his relationship with CAB, too. He recently traveled to the brand's Education & Culinary Center in Wooster, Ohio, to participate in a food trends roundtable.

"We all had stories for each other," Hendrickson says of visiting with chefs from across the country. He came back with new ideas and also shared what it's like to serve a demographic that includes farmers and cattlemen.

The Nebraskan is one of the most recent to join the elite ranks of CAB's Brand Ambassadors. Chefs and restaurant owners who participate in the program are passionate about the brand.

The goal is a win-win for all involved, says Melissa Brewer, CAB assistant director for public relations. "We work to promote those restaurants as the flagship establishments in their marketplace, and help tell their story."

In turn, those involved in foodservice keep the company updated on new trends and unique menu ideas, she says.

When Hendrickson traded in his electrical engineering job for that of restaurant owner, he didn't know how it would turn out.

Today, he says, "People expect more now than they used to."

Hendrickson doesn't mind. Great expectations keep the team focused on delivering the best and building that line of folks who know they won't be disappointed.

