



# ‘The West’ Reaches the Coast

Beef can unlock California cultural mysteries.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**H**er songs are endless, her tales dreamlike. A standout among peers, California is the cool kid, the renegade.

The Golden State exudes an image rooted deep in Americana, but so deeply coastal there’s not much chance to notice her less flashy traits. The American cowboy, cattle herds in the hills, a sizzling steak on the grill — how far west does “The West” really reach?

Dana Point, Calif., is just a sleepy marina town a few miles south of smaller, better-known Laguna Beach, halfway between Los Angeles (L.A.) and San Diego. Never hungry for the spotlight, it is a testament to the ambiguity that is California culture.

Atop a hilly bend along its coastal 7-mile stretch sits Jimmy’s Famous American Tavern, or J-FAT for short. It’s here, in the safe haven of the black leather booths that patrons ride the stereotype.

“Certainly there is an element of no red meat, no carbs,” David Wilhelm says, attributing some of the blame to the media.

J-FAT’s creative collaborator and co-owner is a veteran in the business. With 20 concepts in his portfolio from L.A. south, the “self-

taught dinosaur” knows a thing or two about his clientele.

“Despite how people talk, I know what they order,” he says. Unedited, they’ll choose beef every time. “The number one selling item on our menu is our half-pound cheeseburger.”

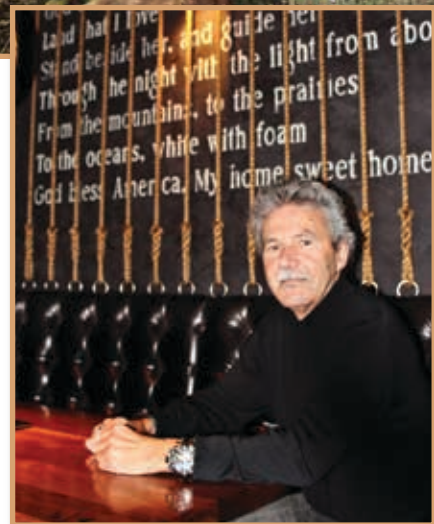
Maybe it’s a coastal thing, but many in and outside of the state seem to assume Californians don’t consume as much beef as those inland. Perhaps they think the beaches and mountains eliminate desire for that uniquely tender, juicy flavor.

Wilhelm dismisses the idea with a shrug.

“You hear lots of chatter about eating lighter, vegetarian and avoiding red meat, but the reality is, in a community like this, these are regular people not unlike those I grew up with in the Midwest.”

Turns out, they’re all over J-FAT’s customer bases in San Diego, Dana Point, Woodland Hills in west L.A., and near Brea on the east side. Collectively, five burgers on the menu make up 20% of all entrées sold.

Says the man who put them there, “There’s plenty of people who really love red meat and eat it on a regular basis.”



## Go west, young man

Wilhelm has all the characteristics of a West Coast native. He’s lived here long enough to fit the part. Neat, a bit guarded, younger in appearance than years, he’s casual in a sophisticated way. Like a culinary don, he sits in a corner booth at Dana Point, ice water on the table and the restaurant’s workings on his mind. If it weren’t for the laptop and staff who frequent his table, he might be just a businessman trying to escape the sun.

“I like being the man behind the curtains right now,” he says in contrast to previous restaurant concepts that held his name. “I’m still the flame keeper, but I enjoy not being front and center of everything. With Jimmy’s, what’s driving traffic is the restaurant, the brand, the experience ... not the restaurateur.”

The popularity and appeal of the J-FAT brand took Wilhelm a bit by surprise — a

rare feat for someone who's immersed himself in the business since college, when he let go of the long-held aspiration of being a concert pianist. The years that followed were a blur of everything from waiting tables to working on menu development with national chains.

J-FAT is a relaxed spot with a fancy-to-focused menu and fits in the niche called "premium-casual." A typical lunch crowd can mix a work group in heels with a beach crowd in bikinis.

"When we opened in San Diego (May 2010), I thought it would be more hipster-oriented. From Day 1, we had millennials to retirees. We're not pigeonholed into any one style," he says. "It's girls night out, it's families, date night, birthday parties and, of course, holidays."

The 2014 launch of Dana Point was a whole other beast.

"We opened quietly on a Tuesday night and did 300 dinners. Those first three months were one of the toughest openings because I never expected the numbers," he says, noting the volume, and sales validated and set precedent for the concept moving forward. "We just came out of the gate strongly, and we've never looked back."

### Consistency: the main ingredient

Looking back is common to J-FAT customers. Two or three times a week, Wilhelm sees people dine on dishes that tie back to his Midwestern roots, where he was the oldest of six and his mother prepared meals from scratch.



"I was all about the whole meat-and-potatoes thing," he says. Of the diversity he found through travels around the country and working summers in New York City, he adds, "I loved the variety of different cooking styles, so I really wanted to make Jimmy's a celebration of all things Americana."

Today's numbers keep the party going. "We're not a huge account," he says from the front booth, "but hopefully we're on our way to becoming a substantial one. Our target is to not look at a location site if we don't think it can do at least \$5 million in annual sales."

A Santa Monica expansion is set for September 2016.

From behind the scenes in one to on the scene in another, Wilhelm's learned too many things to retell them all in an afternoon; but if his success has anything in common, it's consistency.

"We drill down to micro specs for the production recipes," he says. He's been known to take successful dishes off the menu if they can't be executed consistently every time.

"If a guest comes in on two different occasions, orders the same dish and has a different eating experience, you're not building brand loyalty. It's about being meticulous, it's about tasting the sauces," Wilhelm says.

"It starts with the raw product," — something he's found with the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, and why he considers himself "a brother in arms" with the ranchers who produce it.

Their world is more of the inland West and days of old; his, a modern-day

opposite. Still, Wilhelm, like his ranching counterparts, well understands there's more to the lifestyles than frolicking calves and smiling customers.

"We go through similar challenges, and what they do is extremely appreciated," he says. "When it hits the table, I don't know that we can ever convey the work it took to get there."

Like the team he trains in "the back and front of the house," the flame keeper says ranchers are an equal part, and arguably the most important.

"They're providing my number-one-selling protein," he says. "We may not charge \$56 for a ribeye here, but my customers still expect the same value at our price point of \$36."

"When I know that somebody's got my back and I don't have to worry about what's coming in the kitchen door, they're making my job and my day easier," he continues.

Like a line out of a cattlemen's journal, Wilhelm reflects on getting out of the business. He's 66 and says there's never been a day he hasn't looked forward to coming to work. Sure there's a long-term plan to sell the chain, but then he'd just open up a restaurant in Laguna to "tinker with it."

"There's only so much golf you can play," he says, "and I'm still having fun."

Angus ranchers, whether near the sleepy towns of the West or the wide-open spaces of "The West," help feed customers in their home states and elsewhere, even those on the Coast. So, for all those who walk less in restaurants and more in pastures, rest assured Wilhelm walks with you, just on different ground.



**Editor's Note:** *Laura Conaway is a producer communications specialist for CAB.*