

Rising Star



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Chef shines at CAB.

by **Miranda Reiman**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Take a peek at the little-girl Ashley Pado eating supper and you might have seen her frowning at a plate of fish sticks or broccoli-cheese casserole, rather than dining on short rib torchon or brijole. Today, the young professional not only enjoys those elite beef dishes, but she can pronounce them, identify them and even whip them up. She often does in her role as a *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand chef.

Even though her mother didn't prepare supper out of a French cookbook, Pado was determined to try it herself. She got her first cookbook in fourth grade, and her birthday and Christmas wish lists soon became dominated by kitchen equipment.

Regardless of what was on her plate throughout her formative years, the Wooster, Ohio, native avows her television was always tuned to one selection: The Food Network.

Culinary training

Dreams of one day becoming a chef led Pado to enroll in a culinary arts technical program through her high school. There, she landed a spot on the competition team.

"I was hooked at that point," she says. One thing kept leading to another.

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The brief attention her now-favorite protein received during that formal education didn't prepare the budding chef for her current position, either.

"It's kind of a joke now," Pado says, talking about her beef study unit at school, which included looking through books and grilling a few steaks.

Everything in her background led her to this place she feels she was meant to be.

While in Florida, Pado was selected to compete on the TV show *Master Chef*.

"I was 18 years old, and I couldn't believe I was getting to meet Gordon Ramsey," Pado says, noting the experience with the show-business chef led her to settle in California for a few years. "I knew out there I could get a really cool job and work my way around the city some."

So, that's what she did. Pado worked in popular upscale restaurants, and then, somewhat on a whim, she Googled "food

styling" to see if she could land a job or shadow a professional. That led to work as a freelance stylist. One day Pado was staging a half-eaten Christmas dinner for a sitcom; the next, she was making beautiful burritos for a Taco Bell commercial.

"I was an on-call makeup artist for food," she says.

Homecoming

After a couple of years on the West Coast, her Midwest roots were calling. Pado says she didn't know much about CAB, even though she'd grown up with it in her backyard. Her "mimi" (her mom's mom) encouraged her to apply at the locally based, world-wide company.

"I handed my résumé to the receptionist and said, 'I don't know if you're looking for chefs or have any on staff, but I am a chef, and I'm looking for a job,'" Pado says.

With the newly opened Education & Culinary Center (ECC), it wasn't long until she got a call back and officially started as meat manager in 2012. She still functions in that role, but was quickly recognized as a chef, too.

"They've invested so much time into teaching me about beef," she says.

Pado divides time between getting the ECC's meat lab set up for groups, managing the meat inventory, recipe ideation and testing, and cooking for CAB guests.

She is the master of the meat grinder,

experimenting with custom blends and creating ground beef out of whole muscles.

After a session on meat fabrication, she and Phil Bass, the brand's meat scientist, are often left to continue cutting those primals before using it in an upcoming ECC menu or offering the cuts for an employee meat sale.

"I call it meat-table therapy," she laughs. It's also perhaps her biggest area of continuing education since coming to the brand.

"Dr. Phil has got a Ph.D. in this, and I'm not paying him a thing to teach me," she says.

Getting the most from each carcass was one of her first lessons from Bass.

"That animal's purpose was to feed us. Respect that and utilize it. Figure out and find a home for all the meat that came from that animal," she recites. "I'll use up trimmings to make grinds or to cook lunch for the ECC staff."

Food styling

There is one part of her job that requires her to throw beef in the trash without so much as a bite taken, and it's a throwback to her California training.

Vaseline jar and hairspray can in hand, Pado has one goal: to make you want to eat whatever beef is in the photograph.

"Food is an experience in every way. That can be tasting it, it can be eating it and it can be seeing it," she says.

As in most aspects of her position, a photo shoot is a team project. Ashley gets an assignment from staff photographer Mark Merryweather that outlines the "drama," such as a dim-lit, romantic dinner or a bright, fun outdoor barbecue. Chef Michael Ollier provides vision for the dishes.

"Food styling is not 100% just food. It's about the mood, the lighting," she says.

Merryweather sketches out how that product should look, and Pado and Ollier select cuts and accompanying vegetables or garnishes. She does plenty of prep work, because once the meat is done to perfection, there's a small window of opportunity for the ideal shot.

"It's all about keeping that beef looking hot, which is absolutely terrifying," she admits. The studio lighting is set, so once Pado gets done settling the beef on a bed of half-cooked vegetables (so they don't appear mushy) and individually applying grill marks with a hot iron, Merryweather can snap many different angles quickly.

At least 10 steaks are cooked to get one image, because everything must be just right, from the marbling distribution to the shape of the cut to the degree of doneness.

Pado obsesses over the placement of the salt and the amount of potatoes on the plate, because she never knows where these pictures will show up. A misplaced condiment will be even more obvious in a magazine advertisement or on a billboard, where many of these pictures appear. Brand partners request specific shots for in-store signage, menus or distributor truck wraps, for example.

"That picture says everything," Pado says. "Retailers don't have cooked steaks for you to buy, but if you see that picture, you think, 'It's going to look like that when I cook it.'"



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Whether it's a team photo shoot or a group tasting session, Pado says she feeds off the energy of those around her.

"We're so blessed to have been put together in the way that we are," she notes of her culinary team colleagues — some with more years experience than she is old. "I don't think a day goes by that if I don't verbally tell them what I've learned from them that day, I'm thinking it."

Ollier, along with chefs Peter Rosenburg and Tony Biggs, all bring diverse backgrounds and skill sets.

"I thought I would feel like the underdog forever, and I don't," Pado says. "They want to hear my thoughts and my ideas, as well."

The team she's working with is as important to her as the team for whom she works. Pado recalls her first visit to an Ohio Angus farm shortly after signing on with the brand.

"He was so passionate about what he was doing and what he was talking about," Pado says, noting that she got quite sentimental over it. "I feel so a part of this giant community. I feel like we're all family and we don't know each others' names."

Among her favorite parts of landing at CAB she lists the diversity of the position, the opportunities to learn and to be part of a company with a purpose.

To sum it all up, Pado says simply: "I'm a lucky gal."



Editor's Note: Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



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