

Little Apple, Big Business

Longtime CAB restaurant wins National Beef Backer Award.

Story & photos by *Laura Nelson*

More than a year and a half earlier, his wife had supported his decision. He'd left a steady job as food and beverage manager for the Manhattan Country Club to try something new. But, after 18 months, with their family of seven living on credit card advances and her bartending tips, he knew it was a bad decision.

"I was thinking what an idiot I was for coming over here; thinking I just had to get out of there, get a paying job. I went to [my partner]; I told him we ought to close the place and that it just wasn't working," he recalls. "But he convinced me to stick it out."

The new restaurant was sinking under the weight of its location's former reputation, unable to shake the image of the place that had closed down the year before.

Two months later, a small but discreet miracle arrived on the restaurant's front steps.

It arrived on front steps and in mailboxes all over the small but growing college town. It was just another stack of bound white and yellow pages to most; but, to the chef, general manager and co-owner of the Little Apple Brewery, it was a blessing in disguise.

Almost immediately, the phone in the little steak house on the west end of the Kansas town started ringing. After the phone calls came the customers, and with the customers came relief for Russ and Kelly Loub.

Identity of its own

It was as if they finally had an identity in Manhattan, Kan.

"I can remember thinking at the end of that week, after those phone books came out, we had a great week. I remember thinking, 'We're going to make it.' This was critical to our survival," Russ says now.

"Restaurants today may not think that's a big deal, but then it was. Not everyone had Internet and cell phones. If people didn't know you were there, they couldn't find your address, and they wouldn't come. For that first year, if you looked up restaurants in the phone book, we weren't there.

"But when that new book came out and we had our ad in it," he smiles at Kelly, his arm around her in the wooden restaurant booth. "Almost from that very day, things started taking off."

Chance meetings, calculated success

In the decade and a half since, business boomed for the beef and beer joint. Posting double-digit growth for the next eight years, no year has seen a setback.

But it's not just sales growth that brought recognition at the



► In the past few years, Little Apple Brewery co-owner Russ Loub has been able to focus more on being creative in the kitchen. His passion in the kitchen has led to new dishes using lesser-known CAB® cuts.

Cattle Industry Convention and National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Trade Show in Nashville, Tenn., in February. The Little Apple Brewing Co. continued to beef up its steak-centric menu each year, earning the prestigious National Beef Backer Award in the foodservice division.

Traveling to Nashville to accept the award brings their story full circle. Russ was convinced to stick with the restaurant back in 1995 by partner and friend Galen Fink, co-owner of Little Apple Brewery and Kansas Angus breeder with his wife, Lori.

"Galen wanted a steak house in town where he could bring clients in and show off the final product," Russ says. "He wanted it to be a *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand place from the start."

The owner of Fink Beef Genetics had a vision, but he needed someone with restaurant savvy to help execute it. Russ didn't think he was the man for the job, but Kelly disagreed.

Years before, she was waitressing at her family's neighborhood bar in Kansas City. Russ had moved there after the mall moved in on top of his family's restaurant in Manhattan, and he was working at an upscale grill just two blocks from Kelly. The Texas native and Michigan-raised boy met and married in the city, then moved back



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to Manhattan when the family started growing.

"I guess I didn't really know anything different at that point," Kelly says. "My family was in the restaurant business, so I had always just been inundated with it." She took a break when the first of five little boys started arriving, but she was ready to get back in when another chance came up.

"Galen had approached me, knowing I was looking for something else," Russ says. The restaurant that called the location home previously had a rough year, and the young chef was hesitant. "Quite frankly, it scared me. I didn't know if it was right. It was just ..."

"... the perfect opportunity," finishes Kelly. Their overlapping banter illustrates a couple who has worked, played, loved, struggled and triumphed together for decades.

"I think I told him no two or three times," Russ recalls. "You know, I had little kids; I couldn't risk an uncertain future and a new business. I needed more stability. But then he got to Kelly."

"He found the weak link," she laughs.

"He called our house and got Kelly," Russ continues. "He talked her into it, and then they convinced me together."

They spent the next four months planning menus, prepping the building and re-tooling their business plan. Meanwhile, the new phone book came out — without a Little Apple Brewery listing — leaving them plenty of time to wonder if they'd made the right choice.

Products and people

"From Day 1, we aligned ourselves with CAB and became a licensed restaurant. That was really where we put our focus — on having great steaks. CAB is really what did it for us, as far as I'm concerned," Russ says. "We needed to be aligned with a brand that was nationally known, that had its own quality reputation. There was no other place in town that was doing that kind of thing, putting their steaks out front, saying 'Yeah, these are the best you can get, right here?'"

But like most businesses, it was not all about the beef or the money.

"What's made it work more than anything else is our staff, the loyalty of our staff," he says. In the restaurant industry, turnover can be up to 300%.

"My manager's been here 15 years, one of my assistants has been here 16. My top four people in the kitchen have all been with me six years at least. Servers who've been here five, six, eight years. It's all about incredibly loyal people," Russ says.

Along with staff loyalty, customers joined



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in, partly because, "they like seeing those same people. It's like home for these people; you go in and you see the same person you've seen for five years taking care of you," he says. "We've been so blessed that way. People come back to see us when they're in town. That's really been a Godsend for us, the loyalty of the staff."

Consistent, yet different

Familiar faces aren't the only staple at the Little Apple.

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In the past few years, she has taken on more marketing and public relations duties, running the "front of the house," while Russ has been able to focus more on being creative in the kitchen — his true passion.

The Little Apple started carrying CAB

Natural two years ago as part of catering to the "eclectic" microbrewery audience.

"People who come in here want something different," Kelly says. "If they're brewery fans, they don't want Budweiser or Coors, they want something different. So we want to please that customer. So someone who may not normally order a steak might order a natural steak if it's on the menu. We want to have something for everyone, but it's all got to be consistently great."

Beef products account for more than 53% of total sales these days. Fish and chips (brewery food) is the only non-beef-or-beer item on their top 15 list. Burgers are huge, then steaks and beer.

But with Russ spending more time back in the kitchen now, new items on the menu are almost the norm. They experiment with ethnic cuisines and other outside-the-box dishes on a white specialty menu. Many of those dishes find ways to utilize formerly "underutilized cuts" — steak frites, the Cuban dish known as *ropa vieja*, Braccioni with flank steak or blade lifter ... and the list keeps evolving.

Russ loves that "white menu" with the fast pace of specialties, Kelly says. "When you watch him taking the plate up there to the line, as if it was his little baby that he's getting ready to deliver to a new parent ..."

Russ finishes, "... It's fun. More than anything, it's fun. It gives us an opportunity to do all kinds of different things so we never get stale."

Nobody, not the still-growing list of repeat customers nor judges for the 2012 National Beef Backer Award, could argue with that formula for success: always the same, consistently excellent beef, along with a dash of creative flair to keep them coming in for the next great beef dining experience.

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