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Merriman's Does Beef Proud

The home of Hawaii regional cuisine wins National Beef Backer "Innovator of the Year."

by **Kim Holt**

Want to try "Blackened Strip Loin of Kahua Ranch Beef," "Grass-Fed Big Island Filet Steak," "Prime Bone-In New York Steak with Szechuan Peppercorn Rub and Garden Herb Butter," or how about Merriman's Mixed Plate that includes "Ponzu Marinated Mahi Mahi," "Merriman's Original Wok Charred Ahi" and "Filet Steak Medallion and Hamakua Mushrooms"? If you live on the mainland, you'll need to board a plane and head for Kona, en route to Waimea on Hawaii's Big Island, the home of Merriman's, the beef checkoff's National Beef Backer "Innovator of the Year."



This Big Island destination restaurant is owned by Chef Peter Merriman, who opened his business 20 years ago in the community of Waimea (also known as Kamuela), located in the heart of ranch country. Merriman's was founded on the principle of showcasing fresh and local produce, meats and products in its dishes. This locally grown, locally prepared approach supports farmers, ranchers and the island economy, and is now widely known as "Hawaii Regional Cuisine," of which Merriman is a founding member.

Recognizing innovation

The checkoff's Beef Backer Award recognizes chain and independent restaurant operators, like Merriman's, who are doing an outstanding job menuing and marketing beef.

"It helps put a face on the industry's customers," says Jane Gibson, the executive director of foodservice marketing for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), a contractor for the beef checkoff.

Foodservice is a huge marketing channel for our industry's product, Gibson points out. "Last year more than 8.18 billion pounds (lb.) of beef were sold through U.S. foodservice locations. The foodservice operators purchasing that amount of beef paid roughly \$26.3 billion."

The Beef Backer contest is designed to begin at the local and state level; state beef councils send their winners on for national competition. Merriman's won the Hawaii Beef Industry Council's Beef Backer award this past October. This restaurant was, actually, that beef council's very first nominee to national competition.

Foodservice professionals judge the national contest applications, menus and supporting materials. They consider criteria such as the use of beef in fresh new ways; cuts used, including the use of new and underutilized cuts; beef's menu share; advertising and promotion; waitstaff training; and the restaurant's relationships with the beef industry [see "Selection Criteria" sidebar].

Gibson notes that Merriman's stood out to judges from the very start because of the extraordinary way in which this restaurant met all of the selection criteria.

"It's such a wonderfully, well-integrated involvement with food, the locale and with the supplier community. It's a remarkable story. That was the essence of the judges' comments." She summarizes: "Peter Merriman just really does beef proud."

Merriman's at Waimea

A native of Pittsburg, Pa., Peter Merriman is described as a culinary pioneer and a man of vision who is ever-advancing Hawaii's thriving culinary scene.

Merriman came to the Islands in 1983 after accepting a cooking position at a world-class hotel. As he advanced in his culinary profession, so did his vision for Hawaii Regional Cuisine, and he began sourcing his greens, vegetables and proteins from the island itself.

"The real reason we got into it (fresh and local) was for quality, for the best-tasting food," Merriman explains. "But once you get into it, you realize all of its additive advantages. Here in Hawaii we lost close to

►**Above:** Kahua Ranch's Monty Richards and Chef Peter Merriman have been friends for more than 20 years. Kahua supplies Merriman's with fresh grass-fed beef and lamb. The ranch also participates in Merriman's Farm Tour, which gives guests a behind-the-scenes look at Hawaii Regional Cuisine. Afterward guests return to the restaurant to enjoy an authentic three-course dinner that highlights food products from the farms.

11% of our farmlands over the last five years. Anything that helps perpetuate agriculture is a really good thing.”

He adds, “Whenever you get exposed to the farm and ranch community, you meet a lot of really cool people doing a lot of really cool stuff. It’s fun; it’s enjoyable. I guess that’s just the bottom line. I’ve never met a farmer I didn’t like. It sure makes you humble.”

In 1988 Merriman and his wife, Vicki, opened “Merriman’s,” their signature up-country restaurant in Waimea. Merriman was familiar with beef — meat cutting was part of his three-year chef’s apprentice program from the American Culinary Federation. But the origins of beef on Merriman’s menu lend more, he says, to the restaurant locale and Hawaii’s history.

“We’re right in the middle of Parker Ranch, which is one of the largest cattle ranches in the U.S., and Ponoholo Ranch and Kahua Ranch are within 10 miles of us. It wasn’t so much me; it was me figuring out what was around there,” he says. “The Eskimos didn’t invent snow; they just figured out what to do with it.”

Building relationships

In his quest for fresh regional cuisine, Merriman has cultivated and built relationships with local farmers, ranchers and fishermen whose products are featured on Merriman’s menu. This restaurant often uses 90% local products in its dishes, a standard unsurpassed within the Hawaii culinary world.

One of Merriman’s suppliers is Kahua Ranch, a supplier of grass-fed beef and lamb. Merriman and Kahua’s Monty Richards have been friends for more than 20 years.

The two met when Monty came to Merriman’s restaurant’s backdoor selling frozen lamb. Merriman wanted fresh lamb instead, and Monty said he could have fresh lamb if he’d be willing to buy the whole animal. “And that’s how it got started, because I wanted fresh not frozen,” Merriman remarks. He buys the whole beef animal from Kahua as well.

Merriman admits that it’s very “difficult” to menu all of the cuts from a beef animal. He explains that if you just have a particular steak cut, which is cooked the same each time, a highly skilled professional isn’t needed. But when a different cut is featured each night, a more skilled workforce is required because these cuts might require broiling, sautéing, roasting, braising, etc.

“I like to think of that as one of our points of distinction as a restaurant. What we leverage is our expertise in cooking, and that interfaces really nicely with the rancher’s needs, because they have to get somebody to buy those other cuts of meat,” especially on an island, Merriman points out.



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► Chef Peter Merriman says that one of the more interesting things he’s come to discover living in Hawaii is beef with acidic-based pairings such as Thai beef salad — chilled beef that is served with a lime-juice vinaigrette. He admits to being a traditionalist, too: “A nice steak and good French fries, I’m all for that.”

Monty’s son, Tim Richards, a veterinarian, believes Peter was decades ahead of his time as far as the foodservice side.

“One of the big things he’s worked very diligently on is embracing the idea that we had to have whole-carass utilization. It’s great from our perspective that we’re out here in the middle of the Pacific, but we have

someone who is very innovative in using the whole carcass and recognizing the importance of that.”

Richards adds, “Peter kind of took a step backwards, which was a great leap forward. His chefs can actually be chefs, not short-order cooks. Just by the fact that Peter’s

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Beef Backer Award selection criteria

Foodservice professionals follow these selection criteria in judging the National Beef Backer Contest:

- Creativity – Using beef in fresh ways that showcase its menu versatility.
- Quality – Consistent excellence of beef menu items.
- Quantity – Beef menu share and/or beef used in multiple day parts (e.g., breakfast, lunch, dinner).
- Communications – Advertising and promotion featuring beef.
- Coaching – Waitstaff training to enhance beef sales and the dining experience.
- Cooperation – Relationship with state beef council.
- Cuts – Use of unusual or new beef cuts (e.g., flat-iron, petite tender, ranch steak, Delmonico, boneless country-style beef ribs).



The Innovator of the Year honoree is chosen at the judges’ discretion based on all selection criteria with special consideration given to those who demonstrate excellence in menuing and promoting unusual and new beef cuts.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BEEF CHECKOFF

► Peter Merriman (left) accepts the beef checkoff’s National Beef Backer “Innovator of the Year” award from Hawaii Beef Industry Council Chairman Alan Winters of Waimea, Hawaii, during the 2009 Cattle Industry Annual Convention and NCBA Trade Show in Phoenix, Ariz. “Merriman’s is the first nominee from Hawaii for the National Beef Backer award, so, of course, it’s very exciting for us that Peter won,” Winters says. He points out that this award is very fitting, because this restaurant is located in Waimea, the base of three of the state’s largest ranches, which are all listed on NCBA’s Top 25 cow-calf operator list.

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restaurants have been so successful for well beyond the average cycle of a restaurant is testimony to the fact that he does a great job of being creative and innovative.”

Connecting with guests

Merriman's presents an opportunity for Big Island tourists to leave the coast, travel up-country and eat a steak in cattle country. Guests “really enjoy” beef, Merriman remarks.

“When people come to Hawaii, they want to do the whole Hawaii experience. The cattle that are raised right here are part of the experience.” And that goes for produce and other products as well.

“I think they absolutely love local and fresh,” Merriman says. “It's the same thing — people really want to connect with the place they're visiting. What they eat and the food they consume is a really personal way to do just that.”

Great locally raised food and service draw locals and visitors back to Merriman's, but there's more. “There's a sense of discovery when they dine with us,” Merriman explains. “There's always a little bit of something new going on, something they haven't tasted before, an opportunity.”

Merriman's sense of discovery has helped this restaurant consistently earn top awards as a foodservice operator, including “Best Big Island Restaurant” by *Honolulu* magazine for 13 consecutive years and “Wine Spectator Award for Excellence” for five consecutive years. Recognized as the flagship home of Hawaii Regional Cuisine, it recently celebrated 20 years of service in ranch country.

Other family restaurants include Merriman's Market Café, also on the Big Island, a newly opened Merriman's Kapalua Restaurant on Maui, and a fourth restaurant slated to open on Kauai later this year.

All Merriman's restaurants operate under the mission statement of “Do the right thing.” Merriman explains, “We always try to do the right thing, whether it comes to being ecologically friendly, serving the right food or cooking the right type of food or how we treat our guests who come into our restaurants.”

He says, “it means a lot” to be recognized with the beef industry's national Beef Backer Award.

“It makes you proud and humble at the same time. It's nice to know that we're



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►The waitstaff's extensive knowledge of food and wine pairings and attention to detail help keep guests returning to Merriman's. Some of the wait- and kitchen staff have been with this company for all 20 years of its existence.

working together as partners, because we really feel that we are partners with everybody in the agricultural community, including the beef industry. And it's nice to be recognized by your partners.”

For more information on Merriman's, visit www.merrimanshawaii.com.

