

► Restaurant owners Greg and Kara Parle of Merced, Calif., say serving CAB® product helped them win the national 2005 Beef Backer Award in the independent restaurant category at the Cattle Industry Annual Convention.



Small Town Tradition, Big Time Quality

CAB®-licensed restaurant wins this year's
national Beef Backer Award.

Story & photos by *Meghan Richey*

The spirit of the Western ranching lifestyle is proudly burned into the redwood walls of the Branding Iron in Merced, Calif., a restaurant whose value of tradition is matched only by its value placed on high-quality beef. Owned by Greg and Kara Parle, this small-town restaurant, which gets its name from the irons of more than 200 local ranchers who've branded the walls, has won big-time awards for its support of the cattle industry.

A Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-

licensed restaurant, the Branding Iron was awarded the 2005 Beef Backer Award in the independent restaurant category at the 2006 Cattle Industry Annual Convention in Denver, Colo. Before winning the 2005 national title, the Branding Iron won the 2004 California Beef Council Beef Backer restaurant award.

"In today's business environment, chains are prevalent, so for an independent restaurant to survive and thrive, you have to do something special," Greg says. "Our

something special is that we serve the best beef we can find — and that's *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®)."

While serving Angus beef isn't one of the award's requirements, the Parles say it gave them an advantage in the award's six evaluation areas, which include menu creativity, use of new beef cuts, quality of beef products, menu share of beef, marketing communications and waitstaff training programs.

"CAB has certainly contributed to us winning this award," Kara says. "They gave us the ways and means to promote excellent beef."

After only 60 days of testing CAB in their kitchen, customer response quickly persuaded Greg and Kara to create a permanent home on their menu for CAB items. That was just two years ago, but today Greg estimates that nearly 70% of the restaurant's business is due to its CAB offerings.

The mainstays

Regular customers and high-quality beef are the mainstays of the business, Greg says.

"After more than 50 years in business, we're a part of the local ranching community, and naturally, most of our customers are locals," Greg says. "Many even have regular tables and have requested that their brand be placed above their table. And, of course, we're happy to oblige."

The Branding Iron's signature item, prime rib, is by far the most popular with the locals, Kara says, but its other CAB offerings, including the ribeye, filet mignon, New York strip, flat-iron and top sirloin, are also extremely popular. Favorite entrées include the "Blue Moo," a flat-iron smothered with melted blue cheese, and the "Roundup," several small filets stuffed with grilled peppers and onions.

"Great food, friendly service and a comfortable ambiance draw people," Kara says. "People come here because it's cozy, comfortable and family-oriented, and people know they're going to have a superb steak experience, thanks to CAB."

One attribute the Parles say they most appreciate about the CAB steaks they serve is the consistency.

"We get a quality product every time with CAB," Greg says. "We used to have multiple suppliers and shopped around for the best price, so consistency wasn't great."

"Now with CAB, we pay a little more, but it's well worth it because our customers love it, and we know we'll never be disappointed with our shipment," he continues.



► **Above & below:** The Branding Iron proudly displays more than 200 brands from local ranchers and customers, including the first and third-oldest brands registered in California.

Lifestyle, respect, flexibility

“Like ranching, operating a restaurant is a lifestyle,” Greg says. “Like the guys tending cows, we never have weekends off, and there are times of sacrifices and hard work. But, ultimately it’s a deeply rewarding lifestyle choice. We wouldn’t trade it, and I wouldn’t guess cattlemen would trade their lifestyle either.”

It’s that kind of dedication and respect for tradition that draws the patronage of generations of families. Among its loyal customers, the Branding Iron often counts at least three generations. Besides serving CAB in its regular dining room, the Branding Iron also hosts business meetings, birthday and anniversary parties, and community organizations like Rotary International.

Even though they’ll always be a “good, old-fashioned mom-and-pop steak house,” the Parles say they strive to adapt to their customers’ changing desires, while staying true to the restaurant’s reputation.

As consumers’ health-consciousness concerns have increased in recent years, they’ve relied on CAB and the California Beef Council to provide “wonderful, informative ads that promote beef as a healthy choice.”

“With working families, people are eating out more; they have little time for nutritious home-cooked meals, so they head to restaurants like ours,” Kara says. “It’s nice to know we can provide them with that same nutritious home-cooked meal experience by serving the highest-quality beef.”

“We’re always open to something new. We won’t give up the tried and true items like prime rib, but we want our beef menu to be innovative and adaptable,” she continues. “We love taking new recipe suggestions, and the recipes for some of our menu items have even come out of the NCBA Healthy Beef cookbook.”



Appreciating the cattleman

Every day when the Branding Iron receives a fresh shipment of CAB steaks, the Parles say they’re reminded of their appreciation for the American cattleman. But Kara says the point really hit home for her when they attended the Cattle Industry

Annual Convention in February to accept the Beef Backer Award.

“At the conference, cattlemen stopped us in the hallway and told us thank you for selling their product, and that really made me stop and think,” she says. “Many of these ranchers go back several generations in their family tradition of raising cattle. It’s a hard job and they put their soul into it, then they pass on their product to us. We’re happy to provide our customers with that quality beef product, knowing that we’re continuing what the rancher started.”

The Parles are especially appreciative since they’ve seen their sales increase. In fact, Greg says the only thing limiting their beef sales now is the restaurant’s kitchen and storage capacity.

“If we only had more room to accept larger orders, we’d hire more cooks to meet customers’ demands for quality steaks,” he says. “They can’t get enough of that delicious Angus beef.”



► The Branding Iron’s signature neon sign, which shows a rancher branding a calf, is now a historic landmark.

