



Banking on Flavor

Angus beef meets chef approval.

Story & photo by **Fred Minnick**

Consumers' tastes are changing. Diners want better quality and exotic flavors. According to the National Restaurant Association, as Americans' interest in celebrity chefs, television cooking shows and popular restaurants continues to grow, chefs will continue to find new and innovative ways to improve their menus.

Earlier this year, the association surveyed 1,500 chefs and found the culinary artists are interested in Scandinavian cuisine, starfruit, organ meats/sweetbreads, Ethiopian cuisine, kiwi, edible flowers/rose petals, blackened items, low-carb dough, soda bread and fruit soups. At No. 51 is beef, out of 228 menu items.

While beef is less popular among chefs than bite-size desserts (No. 1) and figs (No. 42), it outranked pork (No. 92) and chicken entrées (No. 137). And the good news for Angus producers is Angus beef is top-of-mind for restaurants.

From fast food to premium steak houses, operators have used the flavor profile and marketing power of Angus to lure consumers. According to Mintel Menu Insights, a quarterly restaurant research report, Angus beef on restaurant menus increased 24% between first-quarter 2006 and first-quarter 2007. In fine-dining restaurants, where premium steaks are available, steak is ordered 29% of the time, Mintel says.

Premiumization

Mintel's Maria Caranfa says consumers are eating out more and want only the best. She calls this trend "premiumization."

"There definitely is a trend in premium beef," Caranfa says. "Beef is something that if you taste it, you know it's quality. ... Black Angus beef has really gotten pretty popular, and it's reaching consumers in all dining types and all different levels."

Caranfa attributes the explosion of quality casual-dining outfits and fast-casual restaurants for bringing higher-quality foods in at lower price points. Even the fast-food companies have jumped on the "premiumization train," especially in the hamburger category.

Burger King boasts Angus Cheesy Bacon Cheeseburgers; Hardee's and Carl's Jr.'s, both owned by CKE Restaurants, offer Angus meat between Thickburger™ buns; and McDonald's is pushing its Angus Third Pounders.™ While these moves might be good for the quick-service restaurants, Caranfa believes consumers will think less of Angus beef the more it's wrapped in wax paper or cardboard boxes and served on plastic trays alongside soggy fries.

"If quick-service restaurants are offering Angus beef, casual dining is going to move to Kobe," she says. "It's all about creating better food at competitive prices to get customers in the door."

But Angus has not lost its appeal to the

fine-dining crowd just yet, albeit Kobe is moving in. Ristorante Bova, an award-winning, ultra-sophisticated, contemporary Italian restaurant in Boca Raton, Fla., sells its steaks for anywhere from \$40 to \$200.

"All of our meats are Prime, and most of the cuts are dry-aged," says Executive Chef Peter Masiello, who is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. His dishes have earned several James Beard Foundation awards. "As far as the Angus is concerned, it's a well-rounded piece of meat. You always have a consistent product, which we always look for."

Masiello says he often sells Angus New York strip steaks, porterhouses for two, and 18- to 20-ounce (oz.) bone-in ribeyes. Those steaks run in the \$90 range. For the higher-end prices, Masiello imports Japanese Kobe.

Corporate Executive Chef Nick Rabar shares Masiello's desire to offer premium steaks. Overseeing the menus of the Chow Fun Food Group, which operates four concepts in the Providence, R.I., area, including XO Steakhouse, Rabar trusts Angus quality. In 2005, Rabar made the menu consist of primarily Angus beef that graded Choice and above. That made his customer base happy, as his menus offer a 22-oz. Delmonico for \$34; 12-oz. filet mignon for \$34; 14-oz. New York sirloin for \$33; and the 22-oz. porterhouse for \$45.

"Angus has a much deeper, richer flavor and a nicer color, and it's significantly more tender than other beef," Rabar says.

Rabar says that although consumers love the current menu, there have been requests for grass-fed beef.

"The best steak houses ever are evolving," he says. "If they sit idle, it's like bread, ... it gets stale. Grass-fed products are the next hot trend, and we're looking at incorporating them."

Organic is the trend right now, Masiello says.

"There's a certain customer who will take anything organic — especially where we live — south Florida," he says. "Our vendors know anytime a product is available organic, which is not always, to let me know because I like all natural or organic; it sells."

For Rick Cassara, owner of John Q's steak house in Cleveland, Ohio, *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand product is what drives sales. Cassara has used the CAB brand since 1987 and has plastered its logo all over the menu and advertisements. And in that timeframe, "we have never had bad product," Cassara says. "*Certified Angus Beef* is the most consistent product out there."

John Q's sells the basic cuts, from a top

sirloin for \$23.95 to a porterhouse for \$42.95. The waiters present a tray of steaks to diners, explaining the flavor, quality and importance of *Certified Angus Beef*. Cassara says consumers understand CAB and appreciate the quality associated with the name.

“You see an awful lot of imitators out there, but we’ve not found anything better than *Certified Angus Beef*,” he says. “[Nonetheless] those imitators are still creating overall awareness to the Angus name.”

Cooking trends

Bova just added a wood-burning grill, where Masiello burns mesquite charcoal and kiln-dried oak. He’s cooking all steaks on this grill.

“We find that with the mesquite charcoal, it burns hotter, and the oak gives a nice flavor to the meat,” Masiello says.

The grill is displayed to diners.

“[Customers] enjoy watching the chefs prepare the items,” he says.

Rabar likes to cook steaks anywhere from 800° to 1,000°. High heat locks in the juices, he says.

“Cooking a steak is like a pressure cooker,” Rabar says. “You have your meat

and it starts off blood-red and as you cook it, it pushes this juice to the middle. ... We like to push it hard and really hit it with high heat, because that really seals in the juices.”

Rabar also likes to use trendy seasonings and marinades. For the Cowboy Steak, a bone-in ribeye, Rabar seasons it with espresso, smoked paprika, salt, pepper, a little bit of garlic, onion powder and fresh chives.

“That is a very unique rub,” he says.

He also likes to work with pomegranate and tamarind, which he combines with wine, vinegar and brown sugar for a marinade.

“When you look at the top ingredients of the year, we use three of them [in rubs and marinades],” he says, adding that it’s important to fill the menu with culinary buzzwords, including kumquat, mango, pomegranate, garlic and organic.

Those buzzwords have found themselves in marinades for everything from pork to duck and are relatively inexpensive to produce, according to *Restaurants & Institutions (R&I)*, a national restaurant trade publication. Peter Repak, executive chef at eatZi’s Market & Bakery, told R&I he sees Cuban-style mojos gaining popularity.

He plans to use the classic recipe in such dishes as *cochinita pibil*, strips of pork shoulder marinated in sour orange juice, chiles, garlic and cilantro and braised in banana leaves.

“With mojos as marinade, finishing sauce or baste, a limited number of ingredients creates a rainbow of flavors,” says Repak, who also anticipates growing regard for Spanish ingredients such as chorizo, quince preserves and Serrano ham.

But not everybody is jumping on the marinade express. Masiello is not a big believer in marinades. The only marinade he uses is on a Prime skirt steak.

“We don’t get too much into marinades here,” he says. “We let the quality of the meat speak for itself.”

Cassara, too, believes in letting the meat speak for itself. Only John Q’s Top Sirloin, which is grilled and topped with melted bleu cheese and served with a red wine demi-glace, is created with more than salt and pepper. Although he’s noticed the evolution of steak houses and his cooks will prepare specialty steaks upon request, Cassara thinks a good steak is a good steak; it doesn’t need anything more than a little salt and pepper.

