

Chef Scott

CAB corporate chef leads the cooking charge, targeting restaurateurs and consumers with new recipes and education seminars.

by Fred Minnick

Like many Americans who have achieved their dream, Chef Scott Popovic remembers where it all began — his grandmother's kitchen.

When Popovic, the corporate chef for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), became ill, his mother took him to his grandmother's home in Cleveland, Ohio. He'd sleep off the sickness and wake up in the morning with his grandmother cooking.

"I would always sit on the little stool and talk," Popovic says. "Whenever I'm in the kitchen professionally or personally, it always just brings me back to that time of my life."

Today, Popovic is an integral part of CAB's marketing mission. He travels around the country, trying to convince chefs and consumers that *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) is more flavorful and premium than other brands. In many respects, Popovic is the great "culinary hope" for Angus producers as Japan's Kobe beef invades America's fine-dining restaurants and the likes of McDonald's and Carl's Jr. serve Angus beef hamburgers.

But Popovic says he's up for the challenge, and his colleagues are amazed at his creative culinary talents and impeccable marketability.

"Just his culinary experience has been extremely valuable to the brand," says Christy Johnson, director of supply development marketing for CAB. "He likes to have fun at what he's doing, and he has been very well-received by producers."

Storied career

His opportunity to help the brand would

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► **Right:** Chef Scott Popovic travels to select target markets where he teaches classes and does radio and television interviews to talk about "what makes CAB so good."



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have never happened if Popovic gave up the first time he was presented an obstacle.

At 16, Popovic was hired to bus tables. On his first day, the owner accused him of stealing. A lie, he says.

Nonetheless, the brash boss scared the young Popovic, and he didn't show up for Day 2 of work. He took a two-week break and then was hired to the kitchen of the Radisson Hotel in Cleveland. He had that job for more than two years — quite a feat considering the average high school job lasts less than six months. But for Popovic, it wasn't a job; it was a passion.

"In high school, I loved cooking so much that I even took Home Economics because that was the only way I could get cooking in my freshman and sophomore year," he says.

Popovic went on to become a *cum laude* graduate of the prestigious Johnson and Wales University in Charleston, S.C., and worked for celebrity chefs Doug Katz, Michael Symon, Charlie Palmer and Jonathan Bennett. He's worked at some of the finest restaurants in America, including N9NE in Las Vegas' Palms Casino, Aureole in Las Vegas' Mandalay Bay, Magnolia's in Charleston, and Fire Food and Drink in Cleveland. At each job, Popovic says he learned a little more.

"I've known Scott for a long time. He cooked for me at Moxie and then he was

my sous chef here for a year," says Katz, whose Fire Food and Drink was named one of America's top restaurants by *Forbes* magazine. "He's just super positive, really creative and has high energy. He has that young spirit."

The test kitchen

It's in the kitchen at CAB headquarters that Popovic fries, grills and bakes the future. For new cuts that the meat scientists discover — such as chuck eye roll or flat iron — Popovic will find ways to make them profitable for the restaurant owner and tasty for the consumer.

"I cook the meat and taste it to find out if it needs more acid, salt or whatever to make it more palatable or if it needs a sweet or a hot or any of that type of basis," he says.

In any given month, he'll test 30 or more ideas.

"I'll go to a local grocery store and get all the products and then spend four to five days just playing around in the kitchen to see if I can get it to work the way I envisioned it in my head," Popovic says.

He also spends a good deal of time researching possible trends and calling chefs about what foods and preparations they're seeing. One trend he spotted early on was organic, natural and grass-fed. Popovic says a growing base of consumers and

restaurateurs prefer natural and organic meats. To capitalize on this, CAB created a natural line that Popovic calls the "never, never" brand, but it's really CAB Natural.

"We took a stance that it's a never, never, never program that [the Angus beef] is never given antibiotics, never given growth hormones, never fed animal byproducts, and it's always traceable to the birthplace of origin," he says. "This is the stance that Certified Angus Beef has taken, and we're sharing our opinions with USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture), because right now the USDA's definition of natural means minimally processed — it's very ambiguous and can be construed in many different ways."

He believes the CAB Natural product is the best in the industry. As for other trends on the horizon, Popovic is trying to put an "Americanized spin" on a few popular Greek recipes.

"I think you're going to start seeing a lot of Mediterranean, Greek specifically, influences," Popovic says. "You're going to start seeing a lot more African influences, Jamaican; and I foresee a little bit more of the Scandinavian influences, but that's not going to be as strong as the Greek. I think the Greek influence is going to be the next big craze that goes through the industry."

For consumer recipes, the restaurant-oriented chef finds it a bit more challenging than cooking with fellow chefs in mind. A chef might spend several days, maybe even weeks, preparing exquisite dishes, while the consumer wants to cook with five ingredients and eat within 30 minutes.

"Consumers do not want many steps when cooking," he says. "I have to scale back on my cooking because most consumers don't have the ability to come up [with] ingredients like truffle oil or sriracha sauce."

But he's met the challenge, and more than 400 consumer recipes can be found at www.certifiedangusbeef.com, including a category titled "30-Minute Meals" and delicious meal helpers like Apricot Roast Marinade, Citrus Vodka Dressing and Herb Bouquet.



PHOTO BY MATTHEW FELLIOTT

► CAB Corporate Chef Scott Popovic shows the crowd how their breakfast was prepared at the Dameron Angus Farms tour stop during the 2007 National Angus Conference & Tour. He understands his cooking, speaking engagements and recipe research affects 35,000 American Angus Association members.

Talking events

However, not everybody likes meat, and some people protest

eating beef, pork or chicken, and drinking milk or eating dairy products. Some protest the use of just about any kind of product that is derived from any part of an animal. Popovic frequently gives talks at a Home & Garden show and other events in Norfolk, Va., the headquarters city for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the animal rights activist group. Once he went to the bathroom at an event in Albany, N.Y., and saw a sign that said, “Meat is murder.” As much traveling and presenting as he does, that’s the closest Popovic has ever come to an extremist opposing Angus beef.

In fact, he says the strangest question he’s ever received is, “Why do chefs wear that funny-looking hat?” At most of the consumer trade shows and fairs, people mostly have cooking and health-related questions.

“A lot of the questions I get are more toward the health benefits, and I answer those pretty much that ‘Beef is a very healthy part of your diet: Beef is high in zinc (Zn), iron (Fe), protein and B vitamins,’” he says. “I try to relate to anybody that I’m talking to as a chef. That is my experience. I do not pretend to be a meat scientist. I do not pretend to be anything that I’m not. I’m a chef. I can tell you how to cook the meat; how to make it flavorful; how to make it exactly what you’re thinking of; and I can tell you why I’m using the *Certified Angus Beef* brand — because of the marbling.”

CAB sends Popovic to select target markets, where culinary consumers are widely influenced. He teaches classes at wine festivals and shows, and he does radio and television interviews. At every media and consumer event, he talks about “what makes CAB so good.”

Kobe competition and fast food

Having Japanese Kobe on the menu is becoming a trend among fine-dining chefs. But Popovic isn’t worried. He sees Kobe beef as a fad.

“With restaurateurs using Kobe, the only way that you can answer that is to explain what Kobe is — it’s a breed of cattle, Wagyu,” he says.

Popovic then explains to chefs that Angus is also a breed of cattle and details “the high-



► CAB Corporate Chef Scott fries, grills and roasts the future, finding ways to make new cuts of beef profitable for the restaurant owner and tasty for the consumer.

quality specifications that Certified Angus Beef has to ensure that every product is consistent and great-tasting and flavorful for the consumers,” he says. “I would say [Kobe] is a very localized trend [among fine diners]. I think once more people are educated to Wagyu, Angus and *Certified Angus Beef*, it will kind of work itself out.”

Katz agrees. In fact, he says Kobe is of much lesser quality than CAB.

“I think the Kobe is more of a short-lived fad. I just don’t notice the flavor,” Katz says. “Between Kobe and Certified Angus Beef, I definitely notice a difference. We use a CAB rib steak and it’s just so tender, it’s really great.”

One trend that isn’t going to go away is quick-service restaurants selling Angus products and marketing them as such. McDonald’s customers have shown strong support for the new Angus Third Pounders that debuted in southern California in March 2007.

“Our customer response to the Angus Third Pounders in southern California restaurants has been overwhelmingly positive,” said Ti Chang, McDonald’s

owner/operator and president of the McDonald’s Operators’ Association of Southern California (MOASC), in an August 2007 news release. “The Angus Third Pounders are a great addition to our menu, and it’s great that other markets throughout the nation will be providing our guests with even more menu variety, choice and value.”

Burger King and Carl’s Jr. sell similar Angus products. Some Angus producers wonder if fast food is diminishing the Angus name.

Popovic says no.

“I think it just gives us another challenge to put out our message of what *Certified Angus Beef* is,” he says. “I do a lot of consumer events where consumers say: ‘I see Angus on Hardee’s menu. Isn’t that what you’re selling? Why are you selling it for so much more?’ And I tell them Angus is a breed, and I go through our quality processes. Once consumers realize that, they

go: ‘Oh that makes sense.’ So it’s just one of those things of education.”

A challenge to producers

When Popovic attended the 2007 National Angus Conference & Tour, he left disappointed. There were hundreds of producers and not a single one of them pulled out their grill and challenged Popovic to a cook-off.

Popovic says he admires Angus producers. He understands his cooking, speaking engagements and recipe research affects 35,000 American Angus Association members. For giving him this opportunity, he simply says to Angus producers: “Thank you for developing a high-quality product and being able to give me the product that I need to do what I love.”

In a day where chefs have their own shows on the Food Network and culinary arts have become analogous to being a rock star — with pictures of chefs Wolfgang Puck, Bobby Flay and Emeril Lagasse, plastered all over food cans and boxes like album covers — Popovic is atypically humble. He’s appreciative of farmers and ranchers — a trait rarely found among high-end chefs. But, as Katz says, “That’s just the kind of guy he is.”

Popovic’s grandma must be proud.

