

Prime Time for CAB®

By Mark Polzer, Director, Foodservice Division, Certified Angus Beef LLC

The quality specifications for cattle to achieve *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB) brand acceptance have always been Modest-0 (middle USDA Choice) or *higher*. That includes Prime grade, but until the turn of the century, packers saw no reason to identify and promote CAB Prime. They “creamed” the best of the best for unbranded Prime beef sales because until recently there was no marketing effort aimed at promoting CAB Prime. Of course, the focus has always been on building demand for the more plentiful and consistently flavorful product that still makes up more than 99% of all CAB product.

Most of the finest, white tablecloth restaurants would only consider one U.S. beef product higher in quality than the reliable CAB brand product, and that is USDA Prime. In fact, by switching to CAB Prime product, they stand to take another step up in quality, compared to “commodity” Prime beef.

CAB Prime is simply the most consistently pleasing U.S. beef available. Unlike commodity Prime, only higher quality Angus-type cattle are evaluated for CAB Prime, which must then pass seven more quality standards than USDA Prime. CAB Prime is derived from only the most youthful, “A” maturity cattle with superior muscling, promising the most tender cuts and a more consistent plate presentation.

In addition to USDA Prime’s slightly abundant or higher marbling score, CAB Prime specifies finer marbling texture to ensure consistent flavor and juiciness in *every* bite. Overall, less than 1% of U.S. beef is up to those standards.

Availability is increasing with the growing demand. In 2001, National Beef Packing became the first major packer offering the elite CAB Prime, adding 1.1 million pounds to brand sales last year. Moyer Packing quickly followed, and IBP began identifying CAB Prime in March 2002, beginning in its Dakota City, Neb., plant.

El Gaucho restaurants in Portland, Ore., and Seattle, Wash., have relied on the superior quality of CAB Prime since their first purchase in October 2000. “Nobody has better beef than we have,” says Paul McKay, El Gaucho owner. “There’s no competition.”

The list of fine restaurants now licensed to thrill with CAB Prime continues to grow. When Pam Fortune and her son Jon opened Fortune’s Steak and Seafood in Marco Island, Fla., in 1999, they aimed to provide the best in beef and dining atmosphere. For them, CAB Prime represents not only the highest quality beef but also “the best bang for the buck.”

In Salt Lake City, Utah, after the 2002 Olympic Winter Games where the *Certified Angus Beef*® brand was showcased as a supplier, Baci and New Yorker restaurants, owned by Gastronomy, Inc., decided to add CAB Prime to their respective codes of excellence.

The latest restaurant to sign on is The Bull and Bear at New York City’s posh Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The Bull and Bear came around to CAB Prime after conducting a product sampling or “taste test” with customers, who preferred CAB Prime to regular USDA Prime.

Promotion of CAB Prime in fine restaurants increases recognition for all of the brand, whether at casual dining restaurants or at retail. Speaking of retail, CAB Prime also has a growing foothold there, but that’s another story.

What does all this mean to the Angus producer? Some see Prime as an impractical target, encompassing little more than 1% of all U.S. beef. But remember, you have Angus cattle, and a database full of tools to make this target practical and profitable. When

Oklahoma State University looked at the top and bottom 10% of Angus sires in that database by value of progeny in 1999, the top 10% were found to sire 7.7% Prime offspring.

In another example, a Missouri producer who stacked three generations of Angus genetics positive for Marbling EPD found the resulting steers graded 100% CAB and CAB Prime. The network of 79 CAB licensed feedlots across the U.S. sometimes sells sort groups that achieve greater than 15% Prime. CAB quality assurance managers there say they won't aim for Prime grade with unknown genetics, but given the proper Angus background, Prime Yield Grade 3 cattle are very achievable.

The more we strive to produce and market the finest quality beef, the more we build demand for it. As the founders of Certified Angus Beef LLC knew when they launched the brand with specifications to include CAB Prime 24 years ago, Angus cattle have a natural advantage in producing consistently well-marbled beef.

Thanks to many years of a successful and growing partnership between CAB and the Angus production sectors, premiums paid to ranchers specifically for achieving CAB acceptance have grown to some \$25 million/year now. That should be encouraging in times when commodity cattle profits can be elusive. As more and more restaurants turn to CAB Prime we will need more CAB Prime product, and the market says it's willing to pay for it.

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