

## MARCELLO'S CHOP HOUSE

*By Heather Smith-Thomas*

Located in Albuquerque's Uptown outdoor shopping center, Marcello's Chop House has become one of the favorite steakhouses in the area. It all began about 9 years ago as the shared vision of 4 longtime friends during a warm summer afternoon golf game. During the second hole, these local businessmen (who were all University of New Mexico grads) were discussing/reminiscing about the good times, great food and great wine they'd savored during their various business trips around the world, and decided they wanted to recreate those fine dining experiences for their friends, families and local community.

Today the restaurant they created (at 2201 Q Street NE) is one of the top 10 steakhouses in Albuquerque and very popular with patrons who choose it for everyday dining or special occasions. Dress code is casual, but the sophisticated ambiance is enhanced by framed black-and-white photos on the walls—of Frank Sinatra and Marlon Brando—and great music emanating from the piano lounge. Diners can choose open tables or cozy, private white-cushioned booths—“the ideal spot for a romantic date night or a superhero quick change,” according to one restaurant-evaluating website.

Executive Chef Jason Marshman has been with this restaurant for 5 months. “We do a lot of steaks a la carte and sell Wagyu Prime New York Strip steaks by the ounce. People can order a cut as large or as small as they want. Some customers order small cuts just to try it out. We also have Wagyu ground beef that we use for our Wagyu burgers. We serve it with our special steak sauce,” he says.

“It's obviously a treat for people to have the Wagyu, with its 20 to 40% fat content. The marbling makes this beef melt like butter in your mouth. Regular Prime New York Strip steaks have only about 10 to 12% fat, so our Wagyu is almost 4 times more marbling, and people like it a lot,” says Jason.

“We use Lone Mountain Ranch as our purveyor for the Wagyu. The ranch is in Golden, NM, between Santa Fe and Albuquerque. They started producing Wagyu beef in 2008 and by 2010 started delivering it to restaurants locally,” he explains.

When Jason orders the beef, one of the ranchers delivers it. “He drops by with a case of Wagyu grind once a week or whatever—straight from the ranch to the restaurant. It's great beef. These animals are fed a corn-free blend of grain. This is best, because most feeders use corn to fatten the cattle up fast, and Wagyu is best if grown slowly. It's a slow-fed animal, which gives it the best marbling,” Jason says.

Lone Mountain Ranch grows the cattle from birth to harvest in about 500 to 600 days. Producing this beef is an art as well as a science. “It's a great product, and sustainable; the ranch uses non-irrigated pastures, solar-powered fences, windmill-powered water sources, and everything natural. One thing about New Mexico, there's lots of open land!”

Jason was familiar with Wagyu before he came to Marcello's Chop House. "I used it in a couple other restaurants I'd worked at, but we never sold it by the ounce like we do here. We only got it in for specials, every now and then." It's nice to be able to have it on the menu on a regular basis.

He first encountered Wagyu in 2008 and learned about it when he worked for an Italian restaurant chain called Piatti's. "They served mainly Italian food but every now and then we'd bring in Wagyu for specials. It's been popular in the food market since about that time, but not very much before that," Jason says.

More and more people are starting to learn about Wagyu. "Many people's first reaction is 'Oh, my gosh! I can't believe you charge that much for a steak!' But they have to understand the process that goes into creating that top-of-the line eating experience. It's like buying a Rolls Royce." You pay for what you get, and you get what you pay for, and many people feel it is definitely worth the extra money.

"A lot more people today are starting to understand the quality—the texture, the marbling, the taste. This is why it's becoming more popular," Jason says. It's also a very healthy fat, which fits into many people's eating goals. It has Omega 3 and 6 fatty acids in the proper balance, which the body needs.

"We are one of the only restaurants in New Mexico that uses only 100% certified New Mexico beef; it's all produced locally. We are also trying to get on a source-verified website, which is a new thing here in New Mexico and Marcello's is the test subject. We feel that if we can show that we are a source-verified restaurant, this will be a plus for our customers. All the beef that we use except for the Wagyu comes from source-verified ranches. We are just a local steakhouse—not a big name or a franchise—but we feel it's important that people know that we are here and what we are doing." Many people are becoming more concerned about where their food comes from.

"We are a scratch kitchen, making all of our products from scratch except for pasta. We make our own fries in house, for instance. It's just a really nice restaurant, and the Wagyu beef helps add to that fabulous eating experience."