

## Farm Management

# Farmers who are foodies

By TIM WHITE

**R**ANDY and Marijane Raber were thinking about all the middlemen their cattle might go through on the way to a consumer — a backender, a feedlot, a processor, a packager and a grocer — or maybe a restaurant. It added up to a lot of lost dollars. When a local dining establishment came up for sale three years ago, they decided it was an opportunity to sell their cattle directly to the consumer. So they bought the place.

Now the farm couple own and operate the Bear's Den near Cambridge. They have remodeled the pine-lodge interior as well as the kitchen. However, they kept the mounted bears, coyotes, caribou heads and walleye mounts on the walls. And business is keeping them busy.

"It's way more all-consuming than I thought it would be," Marijane says. "There's not much free time left."

She and her husband are self-described "foodies."

"I love to cook, and we love to try new and adventurous foods and restaurants. The funny thing is, I would say our area is more of a meat-and-potatoes kind of community, but our customers are willing to try just about anything our chef puts out there."

The result is an upscale restaurant with an impressive menu on Rt. 40 just off the junction of Interstate 70 and 77. It's taken time, but word is getting out that the Bear's Den is not an all-you-can-eat wings on Wednesday place anymore. With chef Steve Wagner, a graduate of the French Culinary Institute in New York, the menu features barbecue ribs smoked in an oven behind the kitchen, Greek chicken, pork porterhouse, oven-roasted salmon and crab cakes.

The specialty, of course, is steak: filets, rib-eye, New York strip, T-bone and sirloin all made from the Rabers' own cattle, described on the menu as "locally raised, all-natural, grain-fed beef."

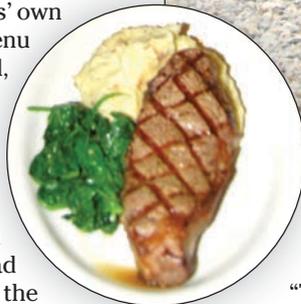
The secret to the beef, Randy points out, is the dry aging carried out by their processor, Bob Boliantz of Ashland. With meat left in the cooler for aging, instead of going into a wet package, the flavor is not lost in the juices. Randy hauls the animals to the plant and uses about three cattle a week.

"We basically need the steaks and some of the hamburger," he says. "Bob helps us out by selling some of the other cuts, like roasts, to local markets in his area."

As for hamburger, the Bear's Den offers 12 different kinds including Greek lamb-burger made from locally raised lambs. Other ingredients are also raised locally. Fresh vegetables and fruits are grown on the Shrock's Amish farm and restocked as often as needed. They also have a local pastry chef make fresh cakes and pies.



**FARM TO TABLE:** Chef Steve Wagner (left), and Marijane and Randy Raber operate the Bear's Den near Cambridge. The Rabers used to eat at the restaurant. When it came up for sale, they purchased it as a way to market their cattle.



"There are still some people who come in and ask what happened to the previous owners," Randy says. "But more and more people are giving the specialties a try and coming back for more."

The place can seat about 100, and in a typical weekend evening, they will see about 300 diners.

Wagner prepares a specialty dinner each night for customers. He has served sea urchins as well as marlin. In addition to smoked ribs, he smokes bacon and beef bacon.

"We like to be adventurous," Marijane says. "That's what this place is about."

## Web reviews give them a boost

**W**HEN the website Trip Adviser named the Bear's Den the No. 1 restaurant in Cambridge, the Rabers figured how many restaurants could there be in town? Well, there are 50 — and being named No. 1 comes with some very good business.

"We have been blessed to have had some good reviews from the Internet rating services," says Marijane Raber. "People read those when they are going to a particular area."

Since then, Yahoo has given them

five stars. The restaurant has also benefited from the oil shale business, including some companies that have held large functions at the restaurant.

"We have been asked if we will cater, but right now that's not something we do," she adds.

Randy has considered making ice cream from the farm's Jersey cow milk. "We would need to pasteurize it, but I think it could be done. Combine that with some good hamburgers and it could be another outlet."