



Following Her Heart

2012 CHB Distinguished Chef Robbi Jenkins followed her passion to a life in the culinary world.

by **Christy Couch Lee**

Be-coming a culinary chef was only a dream — until she made that dream a reality.

And because of her dedication to the Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®) brand, Robbi Jenkins, executive chef of Three Fires Steakhouse, Prairie Band Casino and Resort, Mayetta, Kan., can now add the title of 2012 CHB Distinguished Chef to that reality.

Fenton Barnard, Kansas City Protein LLC procurement manager, nominated Jenkins. This nomination, coupled with letters of recommendation, her résumé, the Three Fires Steakhouse menu and her entrees, led to her recent honor.

Her background is rich and diverse. And it all led to the discovery of her true passion — playing out her life's love through culinary expression.

Strong culinary roots

Jenkins was born and raised in Mississippi, where she watched her grandfather work as a baker and her grandmother — Mama — work as a domestic worker, providing



meals for the more affluent families of their hometown.

“With my granddad, I was 10 before I ever had a store-bought bread or cake,” she says. “And I always watched Mama entertain and cook beautiful, wonderful Sunday dinners.”

Although she enjoyed perusing cookbooks and creating new recipes, a career in the culinary field wasn't at the top of Jenkins' mind as she entered college and pursued a degree in English. Upon graduation, Jenkins worked as a flight attendant out of Miami and

then moved to L.A. to take her place in the corporate world.

“All the while, I was entertaining and preparing new recipes,” she says. “And my friends would always say that I should do it professionally. But I just didn't know how to make a career of it.”

However, changing life events took Jenkins back to where her parents were living in the suburbs of Chicago. And Jenkins decided it was time to follow a new career — one that allowed her to pursue her life passion.

In 1994 she entered the two-year program at Washburne Culinary Institute & French Pastry School in Chicago.

“I wasn't there more than a week, and it was like I had an epiphany,” she says. “I felt within myself that I had found what I was looking for. I was delighted, and I felt so fulfilled. By the time I was finished, I knew I wanted to be a chef. And I knew I wanted to go someplace fabulous to work under excellent chefs.”

Jenkins began her career at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Chicago, where she worked with a number of outstanding chefs for five years.

Enticed to Lawrence, Kan., by family members in 2001, she immediately fell in love with the area. Her professional stops included PrairieFire in Lawrence; Joe D's in Brookside, Kan.; Café Allegro in Kansas City, Mo.; and the



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— *Chef Robbi Jenkins*

Ameristar Casino in North Kansas City, Mo., for a six-year stint before accepting the head chef position with Prairie Band Casino & Resort.

The Three Fires Steakhouse

Jenkins says the Three Fires Steakhouse is high quality, yet relaxed.

"I'd characterize it as fine dining, but not too stuffy," she says. "Our clientele are comfortable when they're here. They're everyday folks — farmers and ranchers in our area, often — who don't necessarily get gussied up for dinner."

In her everyday work as head chef at Prairie Band, Jenkins is responsible for setting culinary standards for all of the resort's restaurants and food service venues; training and developing her kitchen's team members; writing menus and recipes; and choosing select food products from a range of purveyors utilized by the resort.

When a CHB representative approached her about trying the product, she says, she was open to the idea.

"The only thing I knew about the Hereford breed was from an old Jimmy Stewart movie I watched years ago," she says with a laugh. "I said I didn't have a problem with the product I was using, but I was willing to try it."

Jenkins says the Hereford story and legacy drew her in from the beginning.

"I like the fact that the cattle are raised here in the state of Kansas," she says. "And if we picked up this product, we would offer something that supported the Kansas economy. In addition, we would be serving somewhat local food."

And once she tasted the CHB product, she was sold.

"When they brought in the CHB steaks and grilled them up, they were fantastic," Jenkins says. "The flavor, marbling and tenderness were wonderful. Having been a chef for many years, I have had the opportunity

of working with many brands of beef products, and I now know Certified Hereford Beef is the beef product I can hang my reputation on. It has proven to be the most tender and consistent product each and every time."

The CHB product is used often in the Three Fires Steakhouse — in the steakhouse burger, filet, prime rib, strip steak, ribeye and T-bone entrees.

The steakhouse menu also touts the beef as being CHB, and servers are educated about the product.

"We want them to be able to speak about CHB with enthusiasm and knowledge," Jenkins says.

The enthusiasm doesn't end with the restaurant staff. Customers also share in the excitement for the CHB brand.

"We always have had the reputation for good steaks," Jenkins says. "And virtually everyone talks about the tenderness and flavor. I even had one customer tell me that he normally puts steak sauce and seasonings on his steaks, but he didn't need anything with his CHB steak at our steakhouse."

The resort is also located near a golf course that attracts clients who travel often. And these clients also frequent the Three Fires Steakhouse.

"The golf course brings a clientele that is worldly, and who have eaten in many different places around the country," Jenkins says. "They rave about the steaks they get at Three Fires, and even have compared our steaks to those they have eaten at Ruth's Chris and Morton's. I would put our product against anyone's, and I'm confident we'd beat them. I have confidence because I use CHB."

That confidence led to Jenkins' award nomination.

Capturing the award

Barnard says he nominated Jenkins for this award because of her talent, intellect and belief in the CHB program.

"She's an overall great person to represent CHB in the field," he says. "Her background and experience



2012 Certified Hereford Beef Distinguished Chef Robbi Jenkins says all staff of the Three Fires Steakhouse are educated on CHB, in order to be able to answer questions with enthusiasm and confidence.

as a chef, and her knowledge and professionalism speaks for itself. She's loyal to the program and she represents the brand well."

Jenkins says to receive the CHB Distinguished Chef title is a great honor for her, as well as for the Three Fires Steakhouse.

"My colleagues have started calling me the Hereford queen," she says with a laugh. "And I'm very proud of it, and of our restaurant. I've been a cheerleader for the CHB product, and I'm sure it will bring great recognition for the brand, as well as for our restaurant."

Jenkins says the Three Fires customers have grown to trust her and her staff for their selections and offerings.

"I like being a trendsetter, and serving CHB is our way of serving something different and wonderful," she says.

From her family tradition in the entertaining and food world to her career as an established culinary chef, Jenkins' life has come full circle. It's amazing what can happen when you follow your passion. **HW**