



A Rockin' Representative

Chef Kevin Aho rocks the 2011 Certified Hereford Beef® Distinguished Chef title.

by *Christy Couch Lee*

He's been around the world and has prepared dishes for rock bands and international dignitaries. And after a nearly two-decade connection to Angus branded beef, he's discovered a program that he says is beyond comparison — Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®).

Chef Kevin Aho, executive chef at Izaty's Resort, Onamia, Minn., was recently named the 2011 CHB Distinguished Chef.

Aho was nominated by Izaty's and Sysco Foods. His nomination, coupled with letters of recommendation, his resumé, the Izaty's menu and his entrees, led to his recent honor.

His background is diverse, and his talent is wide. Despite what his future may hold, he says one thing is for certain: he's now forever a fan of CHB.

A simple start

Aho's culinary career began as a line cook at Hardee's® when he was 15. However, following culinary school, he interned



Aho's dishes have graced the plates of many dignitaries and celebrities. The ambassador for Kuwait enjoyed Aho's preparations. And, in the 1980s, he privately cooked for bands including Mötley Crüe, Ratt, Cinderella and Jackyl when they were touring through the area.

Aho has been featured in his own cooking shows, as well as a cooking segment on a Duluth television newscast. And, he was the star in nearly a dozen local PBS television segments entitled "Cooking with Kevin."

He was named a top chef in Duluth and was presented awards for the best chili and ribs in the city, as well.



Eye on Izaty's

Aho first came to Izaty's in 2009, where his mission was to help turn the resort's dining experience around.

Izaty's, situated on Mille Lacs Lake, is located about 80 miles from Minneapolis-Saint Paul. The resort features nearly 180 townhomes, a hotel, two 18-hole golf courses and one nine-hole course, in addition to pools, yachts and hot tubs.

"We're very family friendly," Aho says. "We offer yacht launches and fishing, in addition to kids' clubs and live music. We try to give families something to enjoy. Parents can have fun, and kids can play."

Under his leadership, Izaty's was named The Official Best of Minnesota: Best Golf and Yacht Club last year.

"In the past, Izaty's was never known for being a destination spot for food, but now it is," he says. "People come from the Cities or Duluth just to have that dinner experience."

at five-star restaurants in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minn., and eventually worked as a sous chef in Duluth, Minn., specializing in French and Italian cuisine.

His talent and expertise quickly grew. And before long, restaurant owners sought Aho's talents as a consultant and head chef to help open their new restaurants. For the past decade, Aho has shifted focus. He now specializes in assisting struggling restaurants — offering suggestions for improvements and often saving them from bankruptcy.

"People find me when their restaurants are in danger of closing, or if they're in turmoil with their employees," Aho says.

His talents aren't only in restaurant management, however. He also is well known for his talents in the kitchen.



Chef Kevin Aho says every CHB steak he prepares is consistently high quality, lending itself to unique dishes for the Izaty's Resort clientele.

When Aho joined Izaty's three years ago, weddings were not a focus of the resort. However, after the first year of Aho leading the kitchen, nearly every weekend has been booked for nuptials.

So, what makes the food so spectacular? It's all about presentation and quality, Aho says.

Keeping up appearances

When it comes to the dishes Aho prepares, presentation is everything.

"People stand and take photos of their plates before they'll eat their food," Aho says. "When the servers bring out the food and put the center of the plate in front of them, diners say they can't eat the food. It's too beautiful."

And, Aho says, the CHB product allows for perfect presentations.

"The steaks are always a beautiful red when they come out of the package," he says. "They never have a discoloration."

No prepackaged sauces are used at Izaty's. Everything is made to order.

"We make all of our sauces from scratch — we don't serve A1® or Heinz 57® Sauce," Aho says. "We make duxelle, Diane and vilou sauces on the fly, with a pinch of this and that. Everything is as fresh as the steaks being cooked."

And, those steaks are top-quality, thanks to Aho's choice last year to feature CHB on the menu. Last spring, Izaty's did cuttings of CHB through its representative with Sysco.

"I had been an Angus man for the past 20 years," he says. "But, I had heard a lot about Certified Hereford Beef. I wanted the cuts to be compared apples to apples with Angus, with no seasonings or sauces. It was absolutely amazing."

Aho says CHB won, hands down, based on tenderness and flavor.

"When you take a filet that's not dry aged and can cut it with

a plastic butter knife, and it melts in your mouth — well, that's one step below Kobe beef, in my opinion," Aho says. "After that cutting, I looked at my co-owner, Jason, and he was floored by how amazing the filet and sirloin and New York strip were."

Aho says the high standards of CHB set it apart from other beef programs.

"Everything about it is 100% better, quality wise, than anything I've ever used," he says. "It's amazing."

And, Aho says, even his son, Sebastian, can see the difference in Certified Hereford Beef® quality.

"We were grilling the other night, and he said, 'Dad, I can tell this isn't Certified Hereford Beef,'" Aho recalls. "For a 14 year old to say that is impressive."

And, his son isn't the only one who realizes the CHB difference.

The dining difference

Aho says his customer response has been incredible, too.

"We hear raving reviews," he says. "And they ask what type of beef we offer. With the Certified Hereford Beef logo being added to our menu, diners will know. And, I love to tell Hereford's story."

Many clients are not familiar with Hereford beef, he says.

"Once, Hereford beef was only served to royalty," Aho says. "Now, it's making a comeback. With Angus beef, you're never sure if you're truly eating 'Angus beef,' with the crossbreeding allowed in those branded programs. Three or four times a weekend, diners ask what this wonderful beef is."

Aho says he's happy to share the Hereford story — especially with his newly awarded Certified Hereford Beef Distinguished Chef title.



Dishes such as this CHB tenderloin, pan seared and served with a wild mushroom demi, often cause diners to pull out their cameras for a photo. Aho says he believes presentation is everything in his restaurant.

The pride of the CHB title

Aho says being named the 2011 CHB Distinguished Chef is a tremendous honor.

"I didn't even think I had a chance, with the many people involved," he says. "This is the biggest honor I've ever received. It floored me. And I'm proud to now wear the Certified Hereford Beef Distinguished Chef patch on every chef coat I wear."

With all that Aho has accomplished, and with his love of the CHB brand, he will no doubt bring honor to the CHB Distinguished Chef name.

And no matter what his future may hold, it's likely that CHB will be rockin' alongside him on the journey. **HW**



Mick Welch (left), Certified Hereford Beef LLC vice president of sales; and Bryan Lawrence (right), Lawrence Herefords, Coon Rapids, Minn.; present the 2011 Certified Hereford Beef Distinguished Chef award to Kevin Aho.