local flavor
A taste of life in New Mexico

# MARKET STEER STEAKHOUSE

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(Story by Toner Mitchell and photos by Douglas Merriam)

"If we weren't in school, it was sun-up to sun-down work." So says Kathleen Crook, executive chef and co-owner of Market Steer Steakhouse in Santa Fe's Hotel St. Francis. She harkens back to her ranching and farming childhood in Artesia, New Mexico, remembering fondly what she might not have appreciated at the time: being sent out to the garden to gather dinner vegetables instead of heading to a burger joint; the dirt, cuts and bruises of performing the every day grunt tasks of agricultural enterprise. In an early memory, her brother loads hay bales into the trailer she drives out to a field stocked with hungry cattle. Her tractor-driving brother is nine, and she—at the wheel of the family's 1947 standard transmission Willys Jeep—is the ripe old age of six.

Kathleen doesn't view her upbringing as all that extraordinary. Families like hers have been growing alfalfa, cotton, cows—her family grew cayenne peppers, too—for generations. Her father was a stickler for proper fallowing and pasture rotation and was active in regional soil conservation service. "And to protect and care for the land, God made farmers and ranchers," adorned the gate to her mother's own 18,000-acre spread. And young Kathleen grew monster pumpkins, participated in Future Farmers of America and 4-H, and developed into a world champion rodeo athlete. Such was life in the lower Pecos Valley.

Though she would sometimes help her grandmother with cooking, Kathleen was never drawn to it. "I was always outside, doing all my rodeoing. When I was in my mid 20s, I was running my mom's ranch. We had 350 momma cows. It was March. We'd been weaning calves, the wind was blowing. It was just miserable. I could see the wind blowing through the house. And I remember thinking, *I don't want to do this anymore.* Going to culinary school was an overnight decision."

By design, the first six weeks of Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Scottsdale, Ariz., was a boot camp for which Kathleen's ranch life had left her well prepared. "Five-day weeks, 10-hour days, you're learning to peel and cut onions, carrots and celery, all the grunt work. But it was a challenge that lifted me instead of pushing me down. I'm not going to give you some line about the industry finding me; I found the industry. I found my passion."

This passion took her to sous chef at Park Restaurant in Dallas, where Kathleen met her equal in the person of her future wife and Market Steer co-owner and general manager, Kristina Goode. Though a waitress at Park, Kristina had been a manager at other restaurants, felt destined for the hospitality industry, and knew she, like Kathleen, was bound for higher places. Within a year, a friend connected them with a restaurant group in Aspen, Colo., which then hired them to open Steakhouse No. 316. After seven years there, they moved home to Artesia and opened a food truck called The Farmer's Feast in 2017.

Kathleen and Kristina made their Santa Fe move in July of this year, deciding on their restaurant concept after extensive research into potential spaces and their potential customer base. Their Aspen experience, where they paid the consequences of opening on a hectic Friday, taught them to proceed slowly. Kathleen stresses that she was willing, and certainly able, to create a menu featuring any type of cuisine, including traditional New Mexican, and that her cowgirl roots didn't predispose her to beef.

"Santa Fe has such amazing restaurants and chefs," she says, "but we saw room for our kind of steakhouse." Put simply, their kind of steakhouse serves only 100-percent USDA prime beef (Chef Kathleen demands Angus, wet-aged 28 days), which, to be graded as such, contains a very specific fat composition and marbling. It's a standard to which few, if any, New Mexico restaurants commit themselves, possibly because prime beef is difficult to procure at quantities predictable enough for restaurant operation. Although this makes prime expensive, Kathleen and Kristina chose the strategy simply because of taste.

"It's not a gimmick," Kristina says. "I think any beef lover could pass a Pepsi Challenge between a cut of 100-percent prime and a lower grade steak executed equally well. We wanted to provide that punch-you-in-the-mouth beef flavor, and we knew there was a place for that in Santa Fe. Plus, it's what we like to eat."

With an eye toward showcasing the beef's true flavor, Chef Kathleen prepares her meat with a light hand. Salt and pepper is usually enough. "I'm a minimalist when it comes to the preparation of food. My belief is that you can enhance without manipulating. First, use real food and treat it with respect. Your ingredients, including spices, should speak for themselves." Kristina adds, "The fact that Kat is a phenomenal steakhouse chef doesn't limit her abilities to be creative."

Kathleen selects the freshest ingredients she can find. Her simple kale and cabbage salad, for instance, seamlessly blends dried blueberries, lightly toasted pecans and a light Dijon vinaigrette—the result is a dish wherein the stars and supporting cast are both given a spot in the sun.

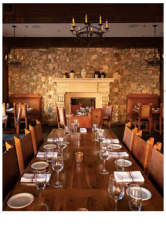
Amazingly, the roasted bone marrow appetizer—which Kristina says is "like beef and butter made a baby," combines prominent ingredients like bacon-bourbon jam, pickled red onions and texturally challenging marrow—produced this effect as well. While able to distinguish the inherent power of each ingredient, I also tasted how they played amongst themselves. Running a shot of fine bourbon down the bone into my mouth only added to my enjoyment.

The less-is-more approach also informs Kristina's dining room. Acknowledging the subjective nature of the dining experience, she focuses on aspects she can control, encouraging her crew to develop shared goals and a passion for hospitality. "In an environment of organized chaos, our team shoots for meticulous, unobtrusive, and friendly service," she says.

If my experience is any indication—our server guided us expertly through the menu with a calm and patient demeanor—the Market Steer Steakhouse is on target. This is not to say that after only three months in operation, Kathleen and Kristina see no room for improvement; in keeping with her commitment to pinpointing the origin of everything she cooks, Kathleen wants to incorporate more local ingredients into her menu and is trying to develop relationships with local producers. Kristina wants to institute regimens for composting and recycling.

Kathleen takes slight issue with the notion that it's all about her pedigree. "Is Market Steer chef-driven?" she asks. "Yes. Is that the most important thing? No. It's about the components. Service is equally important."

Her modesty aside, there are elements of homegrown voodoo that Kathleen can't explain away, at least not to me: her top-secret bread-pudding recipe that took her three years to perfect, or how she seasons bulk recipes in the sign of the cross like her grandmother did—"It makes me feel like she's standing there beside me," she says.



Then there's the magic in her steaks. You want to say they melt in your mouth, but that's not what beef's supposed to do. The beef at Market Steer Steakhouse likes to hang around for a while, affecting not only your tongue, but your teeth, your jaw, your lips. It's supposed to last until the next day, if not a lifetime.

Like a punch in the mouth, but in a good way.

*Market Steer Steakhouse is located at 210 Don Gaspar Ave. in Santa Fe, marketsteersteakhouse.com, 505.992.6354.*