

Much at Steak

Learning about what makes the meat taste great, and an inside look at the south's newest destination restaurant

Story by John Klyce Photos by CASEY HILDER

WITH PRECISION AND GUSTO,

Chef Gabe Garcia flips the sizzling ribeye onto a ceramic plate as flames flare from the grand, broad-iron grill and woody smoke soars up to the hood above. On the plate, the ample steak meets its lunch companions of wavy mashed potatoes, seasoned squash, and a buttered roll, which edge together ever so slightly. Scooped up by a waiter and whisked from the kitchen to the dining area, the meal soon enters a whole new world. Traveling by hand, it passes by swinging saloon doors, a large stuffed turkey with its wings sprawled out, a hand-carved, fourteen foot tall wooden bear, a projection screen showing Bonanza, and a painting of four bulls playing poker before it lands on the table of its restaurant's owner, Randall Swaney.

With his napkin in his lap and his knife and fork in hand, Swaney digs in, his utensils cutting into the choice beef. "If you're starting off with really good meat, and this is all aged Angus," he says of the steak. "Then you're starting off with the best. And you won't find this atmosphere anywhere else in the country."

The atmosphere Swaney describes is that of his recently opened restaurant Marshall Steakhouse, which, though in Northern Mississippi, gives off a decidedly western, old-fashioned feel. Not a single detail is missed. Every table and board in the eatery has been hand cut, and in the winter fire places heat the restaurant. An old cider press rests out on the front porch, and next to it is a hand carved, multi-colored Native American statue named Kalija. It's an astounding scene, and upon entrance you'll likely think you've stumbled into a Montanan lodge. But for the owner, the impressive setting is just one aspect of the place's quality. Because Swaney, a steak lover, considers the meal and service to be of equal importance. "I'm a steak connoisseur," he says as he slices off another piece of his ribeye. "I



Marshall County Steakhouse Owner, Randall Swaney.



Marshall County Steakhouse Head Chef, Gabriel Garcia.



like really good food and I've eaten really good food from New York to San Francisco from Minneapolis to New Orleans. The greatest steak restaurants in the country. So I expect excellent food, and I expect excellent service."

As Swaney continues eating, the waiter comes around with water before departing to other tables and heading back to the kitchen, where Garcia, still working, has Kobe beef on the grill. As a chef who trained and worked in Las Vegas, Garcia has years of experience, and he knows how to grill a good slab of meat. "When cooking a steak," he says. "Have a nice, hot flame on, make sure your coals have come down to a good temperature, and then don't mess with it too much. Allow the steak to cook itself. Put it on, get your little marks, and let it be. Don't rush it, and relax. The steak will do its work if you let it be." This type of approach and effort is a common theme for Garcia when cooking steak, as he doesn't believe in overdoing it. He'll tell you the same thing about flavoring the beef. "Don't go crazy," he warns about over seasoning. "A lot of people suggest buying all different kinds

[of seasoning], but make it minimal."

For Garcia's part, he and the Marshall Steak House team use a blend of course ground pepper, granulated garlic, hints of Montreal seasoning, a bit of onion powder, and kosher salt, the last of which Garcia considers to be important for any mix. "Always base it with kosher salt," he says. "That'd be my big advice."

In the kitchen, while still keeping his eye on the Kobe beef, Garcia works in a fast but focused manner. He presses down on several burgers, checks on salmon, and then moves the steak before lifting up a portion of the grill rails with a handle and moving wood in to keep it heated. "It's lunch time," he says. "So I don't want to be feeding it coal. I'll be feeding it wood for the rest of the afternoon." This plays into the temperature needed to cook a quality steak, which Garcia emphasizes often. "Grill at the proper temperatures, and then make sure it's hot enough to get a good sear. The sear will seal the moisture in your steak and then afterwards once it's sealed, all you've got to worry about is hitting your

temperature." Of course, aiding Garcia in this intricate balance is the fact that Marshall Steakhouse holds the largest charcoal grill in the state, which, as Garcia puts it, allows him to "sear the heck out of steaks nice and hard, and get the temperatures right." The grill is massive, at 10 feet long, and it not only adds to the quality of the food, but also goes along with the restaurant's own unique, ambitious theme.

Progressing through the dining area and passing by an American flag, the waiter heads back to Swaney, who has finished his meal. When he first opened Marshall Steak House, the owner was often questioned as to why he would want to open a restaurant off the interstate in Marshall County. But for Swaney, it was never about just coming up with a place for Northern Mississippians. It was about serving quality food, and creating a distinct, destination atmosphere that could be enjoyed by Americans for miles around. "Marshall Steak House is not for Marshall County, it's in Marshall County," he says. "It's for the south."