

EDIBLE ENDEAVORS

LONE STAR POWER

BY ELIZABETH WINSLOW • PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUSTIN MEYER



Umami, the enigmatic fifth flavor, is often described as savory, meaty, rounded or rich. It's an elusive flavor—hard to pin down—but magical in its ability to both excite and deeply satisfy the palate. Franklin Hall, CEO of Lone Star Foodservice, knows his umami—he's been in the family-owned wholesale meat business since 1952 and runs the only dry-aging room in Central Texas where prime beef is custom aged to intensify the umami levels.

At the doorway of the historic Victorian home in East Austin that houses the administrative offices of the business, Hall presents a trim silhouette bristling with energy and goodwill. He introduces his daughter

Margie, who handles PR for the family business, then steps into a large, comfortable conference room where he describes the business's evolution from a small, retail butcher operation to the large, complex, thriving wholesale foodservice company it is today.

What sets Lone Star apart is a decision made four years ago to take the business in a new direction towards meat suppliers using sustainable, responsible practices. A search for sustainably raised, natural pork led Hall to Niman Ranch—a network of over 650 ranchers using sustainable grazing and humane husbandry methods. After careful vetting of the company's policies, Hall hosted a staff tasting of Niman pork, beef and lamb—pan-



Opposite: Lone Star Foodservice's CEO Franklin Hall with a custom-aged rack of ribs. Clockwise from above: a conveyor belt moves product to be individually wrapped; Lone Star's dry-aging room, where prime beef is custom aged; Ramiro Vasquez displays a trademark "tomahawk" chop.



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searing the meats right in the office kitchen. All agreed that these products were ones the company would be proud to carry. And soon after, Hall discovered Windy Bar Ranch in Stonewall, where Michael Klein raises 100% pure-bred Angus beef to exacting standards. Klein's family has been raising beef in Gillespie County under the same "Half-Moon K" brand since 1858. Klein cites "patient observation and meticulous record keeping" for his success in creating beef with such excellent marbling and tenderness.

In keeping with this change, Hall committed to building a dry-aging room where he could age the meats to his customers' specifications—anywhere from 21 to 40 days—and push the envelope on the elusive

umami. Dry aging is an expensive process requiring strict monitoring of the environment in the aging room, but the results are an intense concentration of flavors and an enzyme-induced tenderization that raises the taste of the meat to the point of succulence.

Back in the dry-aging room, Hall removes a rack of ribs and carries it to the cutting floor where Ramiro Vasquez, one of Lone Star's 50 meat cutters, expertly scores and exposes part of the bone until the ribs are frenched, or cleaned of all meat, sinew and cartilage. Vasquez's hands, encased in steel-mesh gloves, move impossibly quickly, with a confidence born of his five years at Lone Star, impeccable training and his

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own desire to be a true craftsman. Once the rib bones emerge, Vasquez separates the whole rib into thick chops, each one at least two inches thick. Hall tells me this is known as a tomahawk cut—an old-fashioned steak-house cut that imparts more flavor to the meat because it’s cooked on the bone, and is surely a dramatic presentation on the plate.

This attention to detail and high-quality standards informs everything that happens at Lone Star. The plant manager, Tony Sousa, has been with the company for 15 years and runs a tight ship. In fact, it’s the orderliness that’s most notable upon entering the cutting room. The environment quietly hums with activity and movement—both machine and human. Conveyor belts move product around while machines and people efficiently cut, grind, weigh, grade, sort and package the meat as it moves from one place to the next. Every surface gleams, there’s not a speck on the floor, the air is cold and has no scent.

Sousa is serious about standards, but both he and Hall are kind and deeply committed to their employees’ quality of life. Sousa and Hall have had a relationship for years with Caritas (a Catholic nonprofit that provides the homeless, working poor and refugees with housing, food, education and employment services); over the years, employees have come from countries as diverse as Bosnia, Nigeria and Cuba. Sousa himself is from Brazil and knows what it’s like to work your way up from the bottom.

“I’ve done every job you can think of [at Lone Star],” Sousa says with a smile. “And probably several you can’t think of. Lots of positions I’ve filled here don’t even exist anymore.” Turnover is extremely low, and Sousa and Hall are even reluctant to use the term employee. “They’re really like family,” says Hall. “This is the way we run this business: if I take care of the people who work here, they’ll take care of the customer, and the customer will take care of both of us.”

Lone Star customers include steak houses, chefs, white-tablecloth restaurants, resorts, private clubs and select retailers. “When we opened the restaurant, we really wanted to showcase high-quality, all-natural beef,” says Todd Duplechan, chef de cuisine at TRIO at the Four Seasons. “Lone Star brought us some product to try—it truly has outstanding depth of flavor.”

“When we looked into both Niman Ranch and Windy Bar Ranch, we were delighted that everything checked out,” says Hall. “Both are committed to protocols that we can believe in. In addition to the taste, natural meats make a very compelling story.” It’s a story that discerning diners in Central Texas are glad to share.

Lone Star’s dry-aged meats can be purchased at The Meat House, 3267 Bee Cave Rd.

Contact Lone Star Foodservice at 512-478-3161 or lonestarfood.com.