

## resident business spotlight



Exterior of the store at 1228 E. Fillmore.

# Ranch Foods Direct

A Craft Butchery on a Mission to Produce Better Beef  
and Sustain the Ranching Tradition

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The sizzle of a steak on the grill is an iconic part of Colorado Springs' famous outdoorsy lifestyle, especially during the pleasant sun-drenched summers. Mesa residents are lucky to have a unique craft butchery and market, Ranch Foods Direct, barely 10 minutes away at 1228 E. Fillmore. Filled with ranch-raised meats, locally grown produce and a wide assortment of prepared food items, the store is owned by Kissing Camels resident Mike Callibrate, who lives in a townhouse on Camel's Ridge.

The natural meat market, which has expanded to include a food hub and distribution center near Platte and Academy, represents a monumental labor of love for this outspoken rancher who is not shy with his opinions nor short on generosity in supporting and promoting local food and regenerative agriculture. As you sample one of his tender steaks or juicy burgers, he will explain that it took 24 months of care and investment to get that cut of meat from a gleam in some bull's eye to the rich savory flavor that is making your taste buds swoon. So what goes into producing the finest steak you can buy? The genesis of Mike's farm gate-to-dinner plate enterprise goes back to 2000, when he was ranching just across the Colorado border near the small town of St. Francis, Kan., population 1,300. He had grown increasingly disillusioned with the consolidation and industrialization of the meat production business. He also knew the changes were undermining the industry's ability to deliver a high quality, consistent and healthy product to the customer.

Someone needed to create an alternative, he thought. Why not him? Underlying this life-altering decision was his desire to



demonstrate how good beef could be when a rancher does everything possible from conception to consumption to create a superior eating experience.



Mike gives students a tour of the facility in Colorado Springs where carcasses are processed.



Fresh-cut Wagyu steaks in meat case at RFD.



Containers of smoked ham mac-n-cheese, one of the prepared items made in-house from fresh, local ingredients and sold at the store.



Fresh cuts of pork in the meat case.



A Callicrate Beef filet.

large meat processing plant, which is almost certainly owned by one of four large packers that now process more than 85 percent of the nation's beef. In Mike's operation, the calves never leave the nurturing care of Callicrate Cattle Company. Since 2011, the animals have been processed right at the farm by a small crew working under federal USDA oversight. It's an approach that is still quite uncommon, with only a few of these mobile processing units operating nationwide, but it has generated a groundswell of interest among livestock producers looking for alternatives to the industrial production model.

Mike's achievement of creating a successful prototype has made him a pioneering figure in sustainable food circles and led to opportunities to consult with manufacturers working to design the next generation of small meat abattoirs. Processing on location,

Most ranchers run cows that produce calves every year, which are then raised on grass or hay until they are ready to be fattened on grain in the feedlot. From there, they go to a

which eliminates the need to haul cattle long distances and greatly reduces their stress level, is one aspect of his operation aimed at improving meat tenderness, but it's not the only one. Just as importantly, the animals are fed a healthy high protein ration of nonGMO barley and other grains without any of the artificial growth-promoting substances that have become widely used by large feedlots to rapidly bulk up the musculature of cattle.

"I always say it's not what we do, it's what we don't do, that makes our meat so good," Mike says.

Another unique aspect is that he breeds Black Angus heifers to Wagyu bulls. Wagyu is a Japanese breed of cattle known for having less outer-muscle fat but exceptionally high levels of marbling, or intramuscular fat, which creates rich, buttery meat. (The meat from Wagyu cattle is sometimes referred to as Kobe beef, although technically that term only applies to beef that originates in Kobe, Japan.) One of the challenges for ranchers who want to market their beef directly to customers is being located

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in remote rural areas far from populated areas. When he started his business, Mike knew to reach customers he would need to set up a market somewhere along the Front Range. He had grown up south of Evergreen, Colorado, at Marshdale, where he was an avid mountain climber and a member of his local Alpine Rescue Team before going on to rodeo professionally as a bull rider. He later attended Lamar Community College and then Colorado State University.

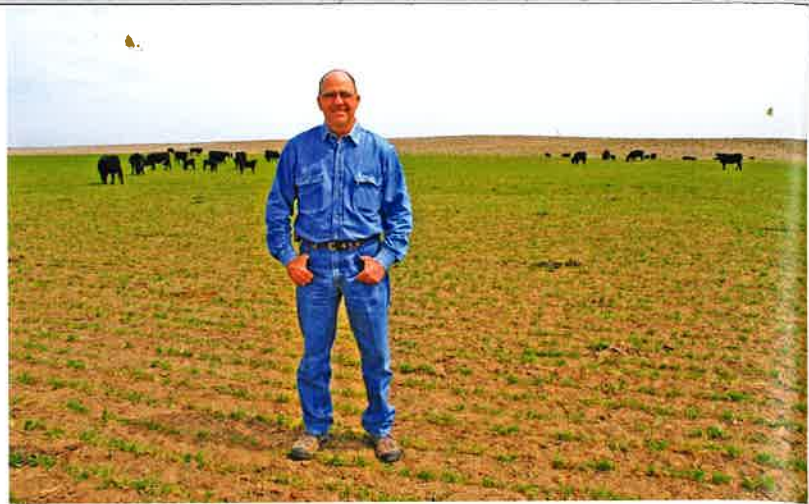
After exploring the options, he chose to open a market in Colorado Springs in large part because at the time he was doing business with a small local beef processor, G & C Packing on South 21st Street in Old Colorado City, which has since closed.

After establishing a residence in Kissing Camels, he settled into becoming an active member of the community, serving on the boards of the Pikes Peak YMCA, the Catamount Institute, Fostering Hope Foundation, and other organizations. He hosts tours at his business and gives talks on food issues to civic groups and school classes.

"We don't want to be a franchise. We don't want to go national with our business. We want to be locally based and community focused," he says.

As a private pilot, Mike still flies home to oversee ranch operations on a weekly basis. He has a grown son, Teegan, who is involved in the family business, and Teegan and his wife Jenice, in turn, have a son, Wilson, who at 2 is already showing an aptitude for building stuff. That heritage runs deep in Mike's family — his dad was a millwright, who helped build the Eisenhower Tunnel and other large infrastructural projects in Colorado and surrounding states.

In the years since he started his business, Mike has transitioned the ranch into a multispecies operation that includes pigs and



Mike on the ranch with his cattle.

chickens as well as beef cattle. Having a diversity of livestock on the landscape, combined with cover cropping, native tree planting and other environmental practices, helps to restore the fragile High Plains ecosystem.

Meanwhile, his store has continued to expand its wide selection of products — which includes Colorado grown lamb, wild-caught Pacific salmon, assorted fresh produce and many prepared food items — all sourced as directly as possible from other growers, gardeners, farmers and fishermen.

"The thing that motivates me when I get out of bed every morning is increasing income at the farm and ranch gate," he explains. "When you go to farm meetings, it is always about how to be the lowest-cost producer, so you can outlast the other farmers who are going broke around you. I don't want to be the last farmer. I want farmers to get a fair return for what they produce. I want more farmers and stronger rural communities. I want consumers to have the option of buying and eating high-quality meat and other food products produced right here in the U.S. by their friends and neighbors."

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