

Georgia Edition

# *Restaurant Forum*

Special Feature



Executive Chef  
Rick Morris

**Buckhead Beef**

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Delivers Consistency

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## Delivers Consistency

By Hope S. Philbrick

When Sam Cover, Vint Kidd and Howard Marcus founded Buckhead Beef in 1983, their objective was to provide the finest quality products at the best prices. That their endeavor qualifies as a bona fide success is evident in the fact that Buckhead Beef has been the number one foodservice distributor of Certified Angus Beef® worldwide for eight years running. In addition, the company stocks the largest inventory of dry-aged USDA prime and Certified Angus Beef in the United States.

Buckhead Beef grew to become one of the nation's largest privately owned meat purveyors before joining the SYSCO family of operating companies on August 20, 1999, as a wholly owned subsidiary and meat specialty company. The SYSCO affiliation offers key advantages, including the opportunity to provide customers with a total solution, from dry goods to equipment to protein. "We market together and are able to utilize the strengths and expertise of both entities," says John

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—John Foster, President and Chief Executive Officer

Foster, President and Chief Executive Officer. "We want to bring the customer all the answers, whether it's on four trucks or one."

With 427 employees, Buckhead Beef operates in three locations: Atlanta, GA, Buckhead Beef Northeast in South Plainfield, NJ, and Buckhead Beef Florida in Auburndale, FL. These three locations leverage a network of sales and distribution centers along the Eastern Seaboard and into the Caribbean.

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**John Foster, Buckhead Beef's President and Chief Executive Officer, stands with the Atlanta team. With 427 employees, Buckhead Beef operates in three locations: Georgia, New Jersey and Florida.**





PHOTO BY HANWOOD STUDIOS

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## PREEMINENT BRAND

SYSCO Corporation has positioned Buckhead Beef as the pre-eminent brand east of the Rocky Mountains.

“Branded meat products in foodservice is pretty new,” says Ron Gilchrist, Vice President of Sales. “You’d see it in retail, but in foodservice it was always from the guy down the road who might or might not put his name on the box.”

The Buckhead Beef brand’s “center of plate” product line includes beef, lamb, veal, pork, fresh and frozen seafood and specialty game offerings plus a selection of premium hors d’oeuvres. Foodservice is the main focus, but the company also services some high-end retail.

Certified Angus Beef is the industry benchmark for quality. “There’s a lot of knockoff programs out there and people try to ride the Angus coat-tail. Certified Angus Beef was the first and foremost, and they’re the best at consistency and quality. So, they really match up to what we’re trying to do for our customers,” says Foster. To qualify as Certified Angus Beef product must meet strict standards based on marbling, maturity and tenderness. Fewer than one in eight Angus cattle qualify.

“To simplify it, we sell marble and age,” says Gilchrist. “We buy the right meat from the right plants then age it. Retail stores carry bright red steaks because that’s what consumers expect to see. But that meat may have only seven to 14 days on it, and hence doesn’t taste

**O**ur integrity is most important to us. Once you lose integrity, you lose the company.

—Brian Phillips, Marketing Director

very good. If you do a 21- to 35-day age on most meat — which we do in the right coolers — it adds 1,000 percent of flavor to the steak. Retail buys a lot of the same label meat that we do, but they don’t buy the upper two-thirds or the prime.”

Game offerings include venison, buffalo, elk, squab, quail and pheasant. Buckhead Beef also sources American Kobe beef from Snake River Farms in Boise, ID. The family-owned farm brought Wagyu cattle to the United States from the Kobe region of Japan, then crossed the bulls with premium American Black Angus to create American Kobe beef. The result is a premier product that marries flavor and tenderness.

## Buckhead Beef Florida: A Closer Look

Efforts currently underway in Florida illustrate Buckhead Beef’s overall commitment to efficiency without compromising customer service. “In Florida, where SYSCO has two specialty meat companies in Buckhead Beef Florida and Royalty Foods in Orlando, we’re consolidating efforts to bring the two companies in line with one direct goal and objective,” says Cory Check, Senior Vice President of Business Development and Integration of Buckhead Beef Florida. “Basically, the goal is to bring the two well-respected meat companies that are now both under the SYSCO umbrella to a parallel go-to-market strategy. We’ll merge the different strategies to take advantage of an incredible marketplace.”

“We are pleased to have Royalty Foods as part of our Specialty Meat group,” says Andy Malcolm, Vice President SYSCO Corp. and Chairman Specialty Meat Companies. “Bob Meeks is recognized and well-respected as a leader in the foodservice industry, and we are excited to have him aboard.”

The consolidation will benefit restaurants and end-users by increasing efficiency. “We can minimize cost,” says Check. “Right now we’ve got dual trucks, dual route, dual sales force. Efficiencies will flow down and can help impact food costs, which, in turn, may help the end-user.”

Florida is one of the nation’s largest marketplaces. With its diverse mix of businesses, independent and multi-unit restaurants, resort properties and attractions, Florida is a vacation destination that attracts international and domestic travelers. The result is a very diverse restaurant community.

“In the state of Florida alone, Buckhead Beef has upwards of 2,000 customers and moves between 500,000 to 600,000 pounds of protein every week,” says Check.

Buckhead Beef employees understand the business, having worked for the company an average of at least 12 years.



PHOTO BY HALCWOOD STUDIOS

While fresh seafood is a relatively recent market for Buckhead Beef, “our program is second to none,” says Foster. “Product has got to be perfect quality or we put it back on the truck. The people selling to us have figured out that there’s no slipping anything in. We reject anything questionable.”

Sushi grade tuna is a hot item. Others among the 12 to 15 species of fish that are typically available include swordfish, grouper, salmon and mahi mahi and a variety of “daily specials.”

“The fish business has become one of the most profitable areas of the restaurant business in the last few years,” says B. Woody Ham, Senior Vice President Intercompany Sales. “We’re bringing a level of legitimacy to the seafood business, which has never been a USDA inspected item. Our independent auditors inspect our practices, bringing quality assurance and control restaurateurs can trust.”

## TALENT

Buckhead Beef employees understand the business, having worked for the company an average of at least 12 years. That Buckhead Beef can attract and retain a talented workforce demonstrates that it offers a pleasant work environment and culture. But it’s the customers

**Fresh seafood is a relatively recent market for Buckhead Beef. The company takes pride in offering high-quality product, and typically has 12 to 15 species of fish available to customers, including: sushi grade tuna, swordfish, grouper, salmon, mahi mahi and a variety of “daily specials.”**



PHOTO BY HAIGWOBE STUDIOS

who benefit from that experience. “We have 250 years of experience on staff now,” says Foster, referring to the combined experience of management.

Not merely loyal to Buckhead Beef, employees often bring years of experience upon arrival. “We have a tendency to attract people that have a lot of tenure in sales coming in,” says Ham. Experience that its employees bring from restaurants, vendors and more adds value to the Buckhead Beef team.

Working with Buckhead Beef means gaining the support of more than just one sales representative. “We don’t put the focal point on any one person in the company,” says Foster. “The face of the company is a lot more diverse. The whole team builds a relationship.”

With SYSCO and SYSCO Meat Specialty Companies behind us, this approach to teamwork crosses state lines. “We can quote a national price. Different regional cutters work from the same specifications to deliver the same product across states, coast to coast, whether in Las Vegas, Los Angeles or Atlanta. No one else in the industry can do that,” says Foster.

## SUPERIOR SERVICE

“What separates a specialty meat company from an average food company is expertise and product knowledge,” says W. Clay Jordan Jr., CPA, Senior Vice President and CFO.

That difference can impact the bottom line. “People are looking for value cuts. The outside skirt used to get put into ground beef. Now everybody’s either serving it as a steak or fajitas. Back then it was worth 75 cents per pound, and now portioned as a steak it’s easily \$7 per pound — for the same thing. The flatiron used to be ground up, and now it’s worth \$6 per pound as a steak,” says Jordan. Buckhead Beef is committed to helping its clients identify and implement cost-saving strategies.

“We work diligently on developing new ways to market beef items,” says Ham. “In the last few years, we’ve had some great success focusing on value cuts, including ways to move beef from the entrée side of the menu toward the appetizer and salad side. Our sales people provide consulting level of service, not simply sales and account maintenance.”

Buckhead Beef services include menu development, costing, product development and marketing strategies. An extensive Customer Service Department is available to handle any customer needs or requests. To provide an opportunity for clients and potential clients

**S**hula’s has been using Buckhead Beef to supply our growing restaurant chain since 1989. We’re now at 26 restaurants in 14 states and Buckhead Beef has grown with us, retaining the sanctity of the very demanding ‘Shula Cut.’ Overall, Buckhead Beef has done a great job for us for a long period of time.

—Dave Shula, President, Shula’s Steakhouse



PHOTO BY HAWKWOOD STUDIOS

The Buckhead Beef brand's "center of plate" product line includes beef, lamb, veal, pork, fresh and frozen seafood and specialty game offerings, plus a selection of premium hors d'oeuvres.

to witness the production process, attend educational demonstrations and even test recipes, Buckhead Beef created a new culinary center in Atlanta along with an executive chef to run it.

## QUALITY

Buckhead Beef takes quality assurance beyond industry requirements. From packaging, to production, through storage, quality control is maintained at the highest level.

"SYSCO foodservices quality assurance holds their specialty meat companies to higher standards of cleanliness, quality and consistency

than other meat purveyors in the market. Being a subsidiary of SYSCO, we are governed by their elevated standards throughout the foodservice industry. You can open any box of steaks in our building and you will find every steak in that box will look the same, like soldiers standing at attention. Our customers can be assured what they ordered and the quality they expect will be in that box every time, no exceptions," says Brian Phillips, Marketing Director.

"We demand excellence from our suppliers, just as we do of ourselves," says Ham. "We talk with them weekly, daily and have them in here to look at any product that we need their assistance in bringing to a higher level."

"We visit the plants and inspect them on a routine basis to make sure they're up to our level," says Foster. "We lean hard on our vendors for legitimacy and integrity. The ones that can't qualify are not our vendors," says Foster. "We don't buy second-hand product. We buy directly from the producers themselves for insurance and accountability all the way through to the plate."

Attention to detail starts at the source and continues through delivery. "From the packer in the Midwest, all the way to the back door of the restaurant, the cold chain has been maintained with every product that we sell, cut and deliver," says Foster. "Our facility is 100 percent refrigerated, from the trucks to the docks." Buckhead Beef operates its own fleet of delivery vehicles, equipped with custom-made, state-of-the-art transport temperature control units. Process controls include driver verifications and seals broken only under USDA inspection to ensure that trailer contents haven't been disturbed. "We maintain and verify that cold chain all the way through — so another thing we bring to the table is peace of mind."

Ninety eight percent of the Buckhead Beef business is "cut today deliver tomorrow." The cut shop processes 300,000 pounds of portion-controlled steaks each week in Atlanta alone — most hand cut. Between 700,000 and 1 million pounds move through the Atlanta building each week.

"We put out huge volume, but we feel like a small cut shop due to the fact that we'll customize orders for our customers, regardless of whether the order is for one piece or 1,000 pieces," says Phillips.

"Beef is not boring," says Ham. "It's our job to keep it interesting. We have some research and development going on here at all times." ■