

Ray's Market celebrates 50 years

By Ross Pattermann

The savory scent of smoked meat hangs heavy in the air in Ray's Market. It's been that way for 50 years, and God willing, it will continue for another 50.

In January of 1971, Ray Gurtner chose an unassuming brick building in Unity to pursue his passion for homemade sausages using recipes his father Adolph, an immigrant from Switzerland, had brought with him to America.

Ray's son, Al Gurtner, is proud to be a third generation sausage maker. He's proud to usher Ray's into the 21st century, but says the success of the business belongs to those Old World flavors.

It's also the personal touch that keeps customers coming back, with the service just as important as the sausage.

"We don't advertise very much, it's the people who do it for us," Al says in between breaks. "I try to treat everyone like they're my best friend. That's the secret to our success, that personal touch."

The family trade

The life of a sausage maker wasn't necessarily the one Al wanted for himself when he was a young man.

"I was raised in it, and really had no choice when I was young," Al explains. "Working with my dad was just something you did."

He did branch off and worked construction, and had planned to go to Alaska to build log houses. A few years into his career, Al learned his parents were considering selling the business. That's when he made a decision that changed the trajectory of his life.

"I decided if I was going to try this, I should do it before they could sell," he said. "I had to know if I could do it."

In 1996, Al quit construction and tried his hand at making sausages. It turned out that like his father, Al had a gift for the craft.

Awards and recognition

Over the years, Al's passion for food and willingness to try new things has led to statewide recognition. Not that he was seeking accolades. For Al, a happy customer was the surefire sign of success.

"It's a big feather in our hat," Al says about the awards his sausage making has garnered, from grand champion and best of show at the 2012 Wisconsin State Fair to second place for his ham in 2014 that missed first by 2/1,000ths of a point.

Al admits his attitude on prizes and competitions has changed over the years.

"I never use to think of it that way years ago because I'm not the type that wants to show off," he said. "I try to be a humble guy. I always thought these guys that win awards and brag it up were just showboating."

A conversation with his seasoning salesman changed his mind.

"He said I might not have been looking at it the right way. He said 'You know, your customers would probably appreciate the fact that you're being honored. You should get out because it shows you have a passion for it, and people appreciate you wanting to better yourself.'"

Gurtner mulled his friend's advice and decided to enter his wares into statewide competitions. It didn't take long before those first awards came.

Those awards brought Ray's Market a larger following, with people from all across the Midwest stopping in to try some of Al's award winning smoked meats and sausages.

"It's kinda funny where someone will tell you they're from. It's kinda humbling too that some people will drive a long way just to try something that you made," Al says. "It's also nice because it lets me



FATHER AND SON - Ray, left, and his son, Al Gurtner, have been a part of Ray's Market for 50 years. Ray and his wife, Janet, started Ray's Market in 1971. Ray passed away in 2007, but his legacy lives on through his son Al, who took over the business in 1996.

know that people appreciate the work and passion I put into my sausages."

A terrible tragedy

Gurtner is a happy man these days, but he and his father before him have navigated the ups and downs and ebb and flow of owning a small business. Over the years, Ray's Market has survived recessions and changes in the industry.

The biggest change came when the store's original location in Unity burned down to the ground over a decade ago.

"That was a horrible day, March 3, 2009. It's a day I'll never forget. I raced down there and was afraid my mom was upstairs yet because that was her home," Gurtner recalls. "The phone line had burnt off in the fire, so there was no way of knowing if she was out. But she was out and she was fine."

As the family looked at the flames and smoke and charred ruins, his wife Connie turned to Al and said "What do you think?"

Al's answer was quick and decisive — they were going to rebuild. "There was no wavering in what I thought I should do there. I was going to build a new place."

Ray's finds a new home

Even as the 100-year-old building came down, Al's mind was racing with new ideas and what opportunities a bigger store might hold for him and his family.

"It was a clean slate, and that was something Connie and I had always discussed doing, having a new building in a better location," he said.

Al settled on land on Elderberry Road in the town of Hull, in between Abbotsford and Colby, knowing that traffic would see his sign from STH 29. The new location also gave Ray's a chance to attract a larger consumer base.

That didn't mean the decision to leave Unity came easy for Al and his family.

"It was hard to leave Unity because we'd been there for 38 years. That was home and everyone knew where Ray's Market was. It was tough to leave since I had lived there since I was three."

But the advantages to starting anew far outweighed keeping the business in Unity and rebuilding on the site.

Once again, though, Al and his family would have to overcome more challenges.

Time on my hands

Al and Connie counted the months, eager to get going once more. It was a hard time for Al. He was unable to work on making any sausage, and people were surprised to see him in the grocery store, buying meat.

"For the first time in my life we had to buy bacon at grocery stores. I always had a walk-in freezer at my disposal. All of a sudden you don't have one."

Sustaining Al through the wait were his loyal customers. As he had been there for them, they came through for him. Showing their appreciation and support, they sent letters letting Al know they would be the first customer through when Ray's Market reopened its doors.

"I sent checks and letters to customers who had lost venison in the fire, explaining what had happened, that we had to dispose of the meat. A lot of people sent their checks back," Al said with emotion.

"They wanted us to use the money to rebuild. I still have some of the letters. I tear up when I read some of them. We've been here for 11 years already, and now that I am up and running, I've tried to repay the favor."

Getting a loan was hard, with the country in the midst of a recession, but Gurtner outlined his plans and made a mission statement to banks and boards of directors to get approval for a loan.

It was a world vastly different from Al's self-contained environment at Ray's, but thankfully his wife Connie, who works for the city of Colby, was able to put paperwork together, and the Gurtners worked on rebuilding their business.

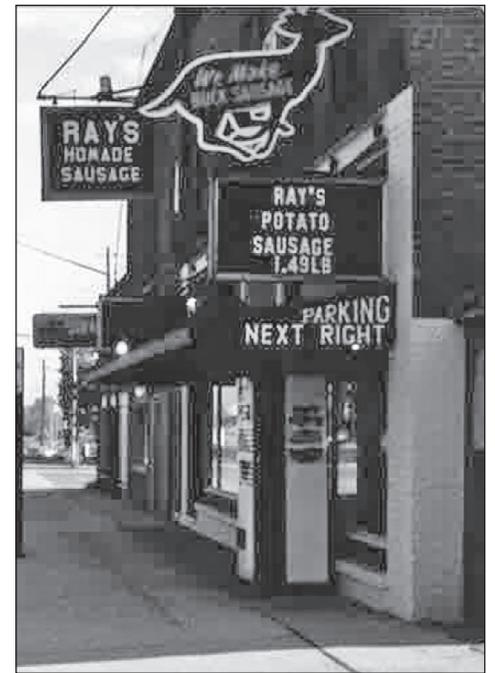
"If it was up to me, I would have just brought them a stick of sausage and said 'Here's what I do, and here's what I want to keep doing.'"

The Gurtners eventually secured the loan and, in November of 2009, reopened. It's a new look, but the smells remain the same.

Looking ahead

Al's father Ray passed on before the fire, and Al has kept his family's generations old legacy going, but as he himself comes up on 25 years as owner, he's getting ready to pass the torch.

Al looked at his options last spring —



BLAST FROM THE PAST - The old storefront of Ray's Market in Unity invites customers in, enticing them with Ray Gurtner's homemade sausage.

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he wasn't getting any younger, and his daughters are pursuing other careers. He consulted Connie for advice.

"We tried to figure out a plan of what to do, and she mentioned her brother, Scott Decker. For now, he's working for me, and then I'll work for him for awhile, and keep this going."

Gurtner has no desire to retire to Florida or let his desire to make the best tasting sausage go by the wayside. He's content to keep doing what he can for as long as he can. The only sadness he feels these days is that his father Ray never got to see the new store.

"He'd be proud to know we're doing OK. He'd probably give me crap too because his motto was 'Never let your business get so big that your wife can't handle it.' And I didn't listen to that."

The business looks to the future, but Al promises that the old traditions and smells and tastes of Ray's Market will endure long after he turns in his apron.

"We use the same recipe my dad's dad used. We haven't changed anything and we hold true to the tradition. That's one thing that will never change."



PROUD LEGACY - Al Gurtner stands in front of the many awards he's won. Al combines Old World recipes with his own innovations. Ray's award for cheese making from 1941 is also included, displaying the excellence two generations of Gurtners have produced for decades.

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