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MEAT+POULTRY

All the
right

KEEPING SAUSAGE
AT THE CENTER OF
THE PLATE

Stuff



Family links

For many years, the March issue of *MEAT+POULTRY* has been designated as “The Annual Sausage Report,” with coverage focusing on this iconic segment of the industry. The history and the people behind some of the most successful sausage companies reflect a passion for their trade and a commitment to succeeding that is based on keeping their family’s legacy alive and well. Two such companies are featured in this issue, in two very contrasting cities and each with a unique business plan led by two very different family owners: Chicago-based Makowski’s Real Sausage Co. and Southside Market and Barbeque Inc., based in Elgin, Texas. To hear each owner’s story, it’s easy to see why they are so passionate about their careers and how they were inspired to pursue careers in their family’s meat businesses. Makowski’s is approaching its 100th anniversary while Southside has been in business since 1882.

Nicole Makowski, bought her family’s sausage business when she was just 22 and has never looked back. As the fourth-generation owner she admits however, she wasn’t always drawn to working in the Makowski’s family business she worked in growing up but was convinced it was the perfect



career choice by her grandfather who urged her to go to college while working at the plant. She took his advice and is thankful she did. She bought the company from her dad and uncle and was encouraged to make changes in whatever manner she saw fit. She is a hands-on owner who takes pride in working on the processing floor to grow the company’s popular natural and organic sausage business.

“I found a true love for the sausage business,” Makowski says. “It was our family business and I was so excited about the opportunity to take over and see what I could do.”

Meanwhile, Bryan Bracewell jokes that he was destined to work in the meat industry the day he was born and is now the third generation of his family to own and operate two barbecue eateries and a sausage processing plant that is adjacent to the restaurant. He stepped away from the business for four years to get a food science degree and went right back to work at Southside after graduation.

Running the legendary barbecue restaurants in central Texas, Bracewell was mindful of not pushing too much change too soon after returning to the company after college. Southside’s retail offerings have flip-flopped from the days when Bracewell first joined the company full time, with over 95 percent of its sausage products being smoked versus about 5 percent in the fresh category. This transition was intentionally gradual, he says. He told

me that because Southside is a small, family owned business, “you often do what you do, most of the time because that’s what you’re told to do, not because it’s right or wrong but ‘that’s just the way we do it.’”

The company’s signature beef sausage and a limited variety of other styles of links now make up about half of the company’s revenues. The sausage is wildly popular at his two restaurants and is gaining momentum among retail customers while online sales are steadily increasing.

Marketing is another area the two companies approach differently but successfully. Being based in a foodie-rich market Makowski’s is thriving by capitalizing on its ability to serve as a custom processor and rolling out a variety of specialty sausages. As a product-development-focused company, it now makes more than 200 SKUs.

Conversely, Bracewell says for its first 125 years, his company offered only two varieties of sausage before finally rolling out five new flavors and profiles. Keeping ingredients simple (mostly salt and pepper and coarsely ground beef) and flavors consistent have been his secret to success. As a Texas-based sausage maker, Bracewell says the expectations of his core customers are basic: smoked beef sausage.

As the February issue reflects, the sausage segment is alive and well and the recipes for success are as varied as the number of products on the market.

JOEL CREWS, EDITOR | jcrews@sosland.com

Makowski’s is approaching its 100th anniversary while Southside has been in business since 1882.



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Weiners and sausages on a roll

BY BOB SIMS | bsims@sosland.com

Hot dogs continue to hold a special place in the hearts of American diners. According to the Nielsen Co., sales remain steady and strong at both the retail level and foodservice venues including airports, restaurants and ballparks. Sixty percent of people surveyed by Nielsen, mostly older consumers, prefer all-beef hot dogs. Processors call the months between Memorial Day and Labor Day hot dog season and estimate an average of 38 percent of sales are made during the period.

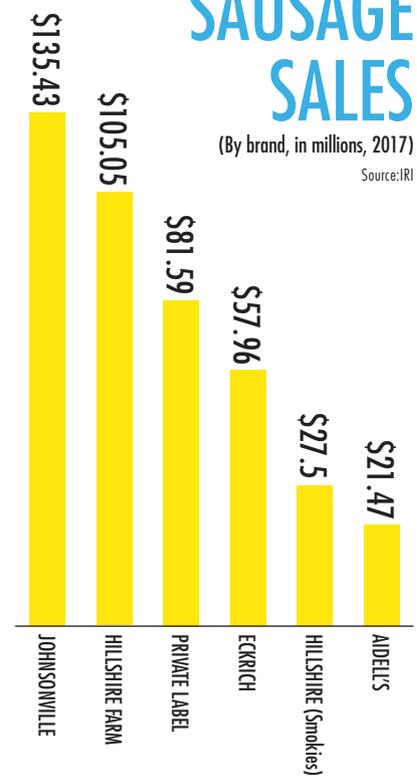
The hot dog's older sibling, sausage, saw a slight uptick in sales for both the dinner and breakfast varieties in 2016. Nielsen reported an increase of 0.9 percent in dinner sausage sales to over 1 billion lbs. with dollars spent at more than \$3.75 billion. Breakfast sausage/ham sales came in at more than \$581.3 million in sales, up 2.1 percent. Sausage consumption is also seasonal with dinner sausage peaking during the summer and breakfast sausage from November through January.

Sales of TOP HOT DOG brands (2017)
Source: IRI



DINNER SAUSAGE SALES

(By brand, in millions, 2017)
Source: IRI



HOT DOG HOLIDAYS

818 PER SECOND
HOT DOGS CONSUMED FROM
MEMORIAL DAY TO LABOR DAY
.....
150 MILLION
HOT DOGS ENJOYED BY
AMERICANS ON JULY 4TH

Source: National Hot Dog and Sausage Council

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Except for a stint in the Air Force as an astrogeodetic surveyor, Ed Lopes, president and CEO of Villa Roma Sausage Co., Ontario, California, has been in the meat business since the mid-1960s. Starting as a journeyman meat cutter in San Francisco, Lopes came back from the Air Force in the 70s and eventually ended up at the Real McCoy Meat Co.

“They did retail corned beef, pastrami and roast beef,” Lopes says. “I ran that company for six years and then I left there and went to another company that did the same thing called Smoke Bar Ranch, and I was the president of that company for four years.”

BIRTH OF A BUSINESS

While he ran the Real McCoy, a

gentleman that worked for Lopes bought into a company called Bella Donna with two silent partners. Lopes eventually bought Bella Donna and inherited the two silent partners, but for personal reasons wanted to open a new company. He negotiated with some investors and started Villa Roma about 30 years ago.

“The investors in Villa Roma were

Photos: Villa Roma



Villa Roma maintains fresh business and watches chicken sausage sales grow

BY BOB SIMS | bsims@sosland.com

the brokers, the distributors and the general management of Bella Donna,” Lopes says. “They all wanted to come with me.”

The Bella Donna business moved from the Los Angeles area to Arizona and eventually the company closed. But the closure gave Lopes an idea for the name and a loyal customer base for his next start-up. “When I started

Villa Roma I had commitments from Albertsons, Bashes and Lucky’s to start on a Monday morning,” he says. “They bought their last pound (of meat) from Bella Donna on Friday and started buying from me on Monday.”

Villa Roma produces fresh sausage from three species. The company uses pork, chicken and turkey almost exclusively for the retail market. “We’ve

got a couple of accounts that were left over from years ago, pizza places that buy from us and have bought from us for 30 years, but for the most part we are a retail animal,” Lopes says. He estimates 99 percent of Villa Roma’s volume goes to retail customers and everything is fresh, with a lone market being the exception.

“We do have one area that we sell frozen, and that’s Hawaii,” Lopes says. “We sell all of the supermarkets on the Hawaiian Islands. We’ve got a standing order once a month and it goes over on a boat and they get it frozen, slack it at store level, code date it, and we have 100 percent distribution in the islands.”

Otherwise, all the company’s sausage is fresh, all-natural and made with no preservatives. Nothing is cooked and nothing is cured. To get a better color for a little longer on the shelf, Villa Roma uses a unique unflavored herb mix that acts as an antioxidant and allows the product to still be called all-natural. In addition – to add a few more days of good color and longer shelf life – Villa Roma utilizes two new modified atmosphere packing (MAP) machines. “The key to our business really at retail, is color,” Lopes says.

“We’ve also got a microbial intervention that’s required by USDA at slaughterhouse level to keep *Salmonella* levels in check, and we require our fabricator to use that same intervention.

“Between keeping the microbial count low and the modified atmosphere in the package, and the blend of antioxidant herbs, we’ve got the best visual shelf life available in the industry,” he adds.

The combination gives Villa Roma Sausage the ability to maintain a fresh sellable color for 14 days, the general time period put on fresh product sold out of the meat case.

FRESH AND EFFECTIVE

Approximately 25 people work at the 14,000-sq.-ft. Ontario, California, facility where production is between 90,000 lbs. and 100,000 lbs. of sausage per week. About 40,000 lbs. a week of that



Villa Roma produces as much as 100,000 lbs. of fresh sausage per week using pork, chicken and turkey.

is chicken sausage. Villa Roma's third-largest selling style behind Sweet Italian and Hot Italian pork sausages is its chicken breakfast sausage. Lopes believes chicken sausage's popularity will continue to grow in the future based on the health and wellness trends continuing to gain momentum.

"I'll tell you what I'm seeing a lot of, I think we're going to see more and more fresh chicken sausage," Lopes says. "I think the public is desiring more all natural, no preservatives, more antibiotic free (ABF)."

The majority of Villa Roma's chicken sausage goes to specialty markets such as Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and Sprouts, but poultry-based sausages continue to grow in the conventional style supermarkets. A new Kroger-owned account on the West Coast buys a significant amount of chicken sausage from the company, and the orders increase every week, according to Lopes. It's telling that conventional supermarket shoppers are beginning to see the advantages of chicken and turkey sausage.



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“The beautiful thing about poultry is natural fall on leg meat is 93/7. So, a skin-on thigh would come out to 93 percent lean and 7 percent fat. That in and of itself is significantly lower than what’s used to make [pork] sausage,” Lopes says. “The standard for USDA Italian sausage is 65 percent lean. So, you start off with a chicken sausage and you’re already 30 percent leaner than pork sausage, just because of the raw material.”

The USDA allowance on breakfast sausage is 50/50, which makes Villa Roma’s popular chicken sausage over 40 percent leaner right off the line. It’s so significant Lopes says, that the company uses “lower-than” claims on its labeling.

This desire for a healthier sausage includes specific certifications as well. However, Lopes cites multiple reasons for the difficulties involved with organic and ABF type production, the top of which is cost. The expense comes in the form of certifications and what producers need to do to obtain those certifications. While ABF materials don’t cost as much as organic, they still bring a higher per lb. price tag, but Lopes envisions ABF for Villa Roma in the future.

“My thought is to create, maybe in 2018, an optional line,” he says. “You can buy the regular pork or chicken, or you can buy the ABF. The regular is one price and the ABF is priced accordingly, and where ABF finds a home it does, and if it doesn’t, at least we’re offering it because I think there’s a customer out there.”

The 11 different pork sausages and six poultry sausages (four chicken and two turkey) Villa Roma produces go to retail stores as far north as Washington state, to the southern border of California and from Texas to the Pacific Ocean, including Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Colorado. The addition of the MAP packaging has allowed Villa Roma to move as far east as Texas, but Lopes admits that it’s difficult to go national from the West Coast with fresh products. He’s comfortable however with the company’s volume and notes that sales have been static for the past 10 to 12 years.

“It’s a good territory, and especially the southwest up to about San Francisco, you’ve got a lot of people there,” he adds. “We’ve got the advantage of having several million people to sell to.” 

“I’ll tell you what I’m seeing a lot of, I think we’re going to see more and more fresh chicken sausage.”

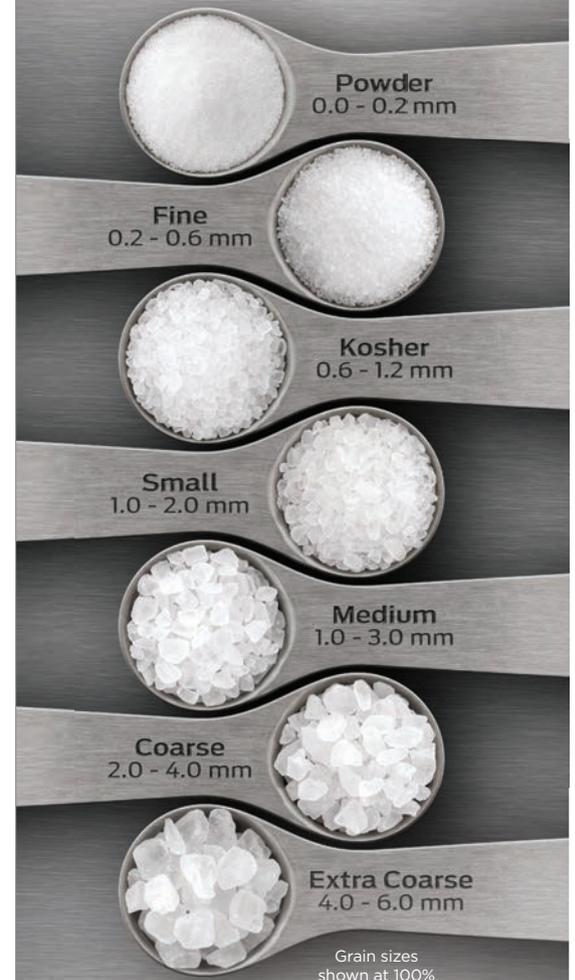
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SAUSAGE PROCESSING 

Keeping it *real*



Makowski's Real Sausage Co. is leaving its mark on the custom processing sausage business

BY KIMBERLIE CLYMA | kclyma@sosland.com

In two years, Makowski's Real Sausage Co. will be celebrating its centennial at its home on the South Side of Chicago. With roots in a small Wisconsin butcher shop, the family owned sausage processor has made a name for itself as a full-service custom sausage processor in Chicago offering product development, production, packaging and marketing of new sausage products to its customers around the country.

Leading the operation is 40-year-old Nicole Makowski, the fourth generation of the Makowski family to own and operate the sausage business. Makowski bought the company from her father and uncle at age 22, and for the past 18 years has been finetuning operations, transforming Makowski's Real Sausage into the streamlined custom-processing sausage company it is today.

"We do co-packing to the extreme," Makowski says. Today, the company has more than 200 SKUs, which include different proteins, seasonings, package sizes and product claims, such as organic, grass-fed, humane-certified, Halal and nitrite- and nitrate-free.

"The big guys are eating up all the little guys – it's a very costly business to be in," Makowski explains. "As a small meat processor you have to differentiate yourself – we do this through our custom processing and co-packing.

"By going out there and doing all these custom products it has really put us on the map as being someone different in the sausage business."

SMALL BUT MIGHTY

Makowski's sausage plant isn't a typical processing facility. Found on the South Side of Chicago, just outside the historic meat-packing district, Makowski's Real Sausage is housed in a three-story brick building. Each floor contains a different part of the operation. All told the plant encompasses 16,000 sq. ft. of space – from the basement to the third floor of the building.

The basement is used to store raw materials. The main floor includes the loading

dock out front, offices and the packaging room. The second floor houses everything related to processing and production including the spice room, grinding room, the smoker room – featuring three smokehouses – the cooler and two sausage stuffing lines. The third floor is used for dry ingredient storage.

The plant operates two shifts – from 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and from 2:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. – five days a week. On any given day, the plant produces between three and 15 different types of products, in batches as small as 200 lbs. and as large as 10,000 lbs. Depending on the time of year, weekly production runs between 35,000 lbs. and 70,000 lbs. Peak sausage season runs from the end of April to December. Year round, 35 employees work at Makowski's (28 of them are in production-related jobs from operations to maintenance to quality assurance). However, during peak sausage season, the plant hires an

The "trucks" or cages in the plant hold between 200 lbs. and 300 lbs. of finished product.





Most sausage connoisseurs in Chicago are familiar with Maxwell Street and its infamous Polish sandwiches. Makowski's produces Polish sausage for a number of Maxwell Street stands in the city.

“The big guys are eating up all the little guys – it’s a very costly business to be in.”

– NICOLE MAKOWSKI

additional 10 temporary workers to help with increased production.

After product is grinded and mixed with seasonings it is run through one of two stuffers – both of which can run natural casing or skinless products. Then product is loaded into “trucks” or cages that hold between 200 lbs. and 300 lbs. of product. The trucks are moved around the production floor on tracks attached to wooden beams in the ceiling. The trucks are then wheeled into one of the three smokers. Each of the smokers can hold four trucks of product at one time. Because of an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guideline prohibiting the use of wood smoke at facilities in the city limits, which was enacted in Chicago in the 80s, all three smokers use liquid smoke.

After going through the smoker, the product is sent to the cooler and then transported downstairs to the packaging department in a “dumb waiter” style elevator. The elevator system is also used to transfer ingredients from floor to floor.

“We are always looking for better ways to maximize production and increase production efficiency,” Makowski says. “But since we make so many different items, you cannot always overcome that challenge. We run into

some operational issues because of the size of our facility. Our smokehouses are not pass through and we only have 65 cages.” Each department – ready to eat and raw processing – must depend on each other to free up cages, so production can continue.

Most of the product is made on a weekly basis. No product is stored longer than one week. All orders are shipped or picked up from the facility weekly.

SAFE AND SOUND

The Makowski's facility also houses one of the US Dept. of Agriculture's Chicago district offices. The representative has an office on the second floor and is in the plant twice a day walking the production floor, looking at records and performing food safety tests. “We love having the USDA in house. It's great having an extra set of eyes looking at our operations,” Makowski says. “We appreciate knowing if there's something we need to fix or work on.”

In addition to being reviewed by USDA, the plant is regularly inspected by a third-party auditor. The company verifies processes and procedures to ensure operations keep food safety top of mind.

“Food safety starts with employee training

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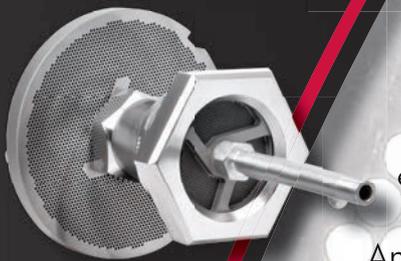
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Makowski's has two stuffers on its production floor – both can handle skinless or natural casing sausage.

– making sure that everyone is properly trained on food safety procedures,” Makowski explains. “We have a lot of food safety procedures in place. The last thing we would want to do is make anyone sick. Food safety is very important to me.”

Five years ago, the company had a product recall. The recall wasn't food safety related – rather it was for an undeclared allergen. “Having a recall was a big deal and was very costly – I want to be sure we do whatever we can to avoid that happening again.”

Last year was the first year Makowski decided to invest in recall insurance. “It's very expensive, but it's worth it,” she says.

CUSTOMER RELATIONS

Fifty percent of the company's product is sold under the Makowski's Real Sausage brand, the rest is co-packed for foodservice and retail customers around the country. Makowski's customers are 50 percent foodservice and 50 percent retail – 25 percent are large customers, 50 percent are medium-sized and the remaining 25 percent are small-batch customers. And, 98 percent of the sausage produced leaves the plant cooked and ready to eat; 3 percent is raw.

“All our raw product is for foodservice customers, and we have a co-packer that

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SAUSAGE PROCESSING



Nicole Makowski is the fourth generation of her family to own and operate Makowski's Real Sausage Co.

handles that product for us," Makowski says. "We run more efficiently running cooked product than we do raw product. If we ever wanted to get into more raw product we'd need to set up a second shift after we're finished with our cooked product for the day. For now, we'll stick with what we're doing, but there's room for expansion if we decide to get more into raw processing."

Makowski's distributes product nationwide,

primarily through distributors in the Midwest.

In addition to wearing the hat of president and owner, Makowski also manages all the sales for the company. "I've built so many relationships through the years that the customers are used to, and prefer, dealing with me," she says. "We've had three different sales reps through the years, but in the end, it's easier for me to handle that part of the business because it requires a lot of work."

Part of the extra workload comes from helping customers with product development and marketing. "We do more than just make sausage, we offer custom processing for many of our customers," she explains. Coming up with new product formulations and recipes takes trial and error and years of practice. "Everything I've learned in this business has been learned hands on. I've learned so much working with my customers."

Makowski has learned that quality ingredients are the key to quality product. "I like to buy by raw materials from the same suppliers so I can guarantee the product I'm producing," she says. "It's very easy to make high-quality product with high-quality ingredients – I can do that all-day long. But making cheap product from cheap ingredients isn't easy. That's not something I want to get into."

In addition to the quality of the ingredients, product formulation depends heavily on the types and amount of each ingredient. "We can only add so much fat to a formulation and we can only add certain ingredients," Makowski says. "Sometimes we'll have foodservice customers who suggest a certain type of sausage filled with all sorts of ingredients that we can't create without an adjustment to the recipe. That's when having good customer relationships is crucial."

Solid customer relationships and the strength of the Makowski family name has served Nicole Makowski well for the 18 years she's been running the company, and was the bedrock of the business her great-grandfather, grandfather and father ran for eight decades before her. "The Makowski's brand is my heart and soul," she says. "I want to continue to push that brand and see it out in the market more. And I want to continue to help companies with product development to help them get their brands out in the market more," she explains. "I really love what I do." 

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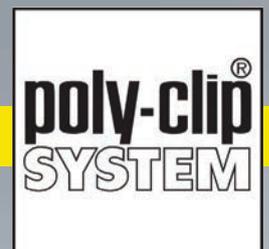
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FULL SPEED AHEAD

Automation brings safety and efficiency to hot dog and sausage packaging

BY BERNARD SHIRE | meatpoultry@sosland.com

Change is taking place in the meat-processing industry at lightning speed. New technologies are being introduced constantly – technologies that allow for increased line speeds and efficiencies throughout the operation, including automation in packaging.

This is especially true with the increasing employment of robotics – mechanical robots – in the packaging of hot dogs and sausage, says Tom Ivy, president of F. R. Drake, based in Waynesboro, Virginia, a leader in the loading of cylindrical meats and a part of Middleby Corp.'s processing and packaging technology division. “We make most of our automated equipment for use in the loading of hot dogs, sausages, and a few other products,” Ivy says. These products are sorted, conveyed and loaded at speeds up to 1,800 pieces a minute. Drake's products include robotic loaders, collator-style loaders and launcher-style loaders.

The company was started by Fred Drake in 1979. Drake spent many years designing machines for the meat processing industry.

While robotic loading and packaging machines are new developments in the industry, automated loaders have been around for quite a while. “I've been in the industry for more than 30 years, and some of these machines have been used in the meat industry for 25 or 30 years,” says Tyrone Beatty, North American sales manager for Drake. But he points to a great advantage of the robotic machines. “They allow the meat processors to load various package configurations on a single line. The robotics allow new types of shapes of products,” he says.

Beatty says Drake robotics load products like natural casing sausage that could be damaged if traditional mechanical methods were used. The robots use high speed end-of-arm tooling. This accurate tooling makes it possible to handle variation in products, like curvature and a variety

Robotics can help protect the product, like natural casing sausage, that could be damaged if handled using traditional mechanical methods.

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“The advantages of robotics include labor cost reduction, fewer employee breaks or sick call-ins, higher product yield and hygienic product handling.”

– WAHEED CHAUDHRY

of consistencies, he says.

George Reed, vice president of engineering for Drake, says in 2013, the company didn’t produce or sell any robotics. A year later, the company was selling Fanuc robotics. This year, Drake is producing its own robotics and control systems designed specifically for its applications. “We are able to deliver a robotics loading system with a sanitary design and a single control system,” he says.

The company also produces collator-style loaders for use with hot dogs, sausages, snack sticks, pickles and other products. Collators are very fast – maximum of 1,800 pieces a minute. Launcher-style loaders are also sold, primarily to processors making delicate products, like soft cooked sausages. During sanitation, these loaders can easily be disassembled without tools.

INDUSTRY GROWTH

Reed says what’s spurring the growth of robotics is the equipment’s ability to

outperform traditional methods of packaging. “That competition is people’s hands. The cost of people’s labor is higher than these robotic machines,” he explains.

It’s not only that, many people don’t want to do this work anymore,” Ivy says. “Working in a cold, wet plant is not appealing to many people if they can do something else. Our customers are saying it’s harder to find employees.”

With much of its automated equipment devoted to loading sausage and hot dogs, most of Drake’s business is outside the US. That’s because more sausage and frankfurters are manufactured and sold outside the US. “Mexico and South America are bigger markets,” he says. “Especially for hot dogs – I call it hot dog economics. Those products are inexpensive proteins, and the people in many of those countries don’t have the income for other center of the plate proteins.”

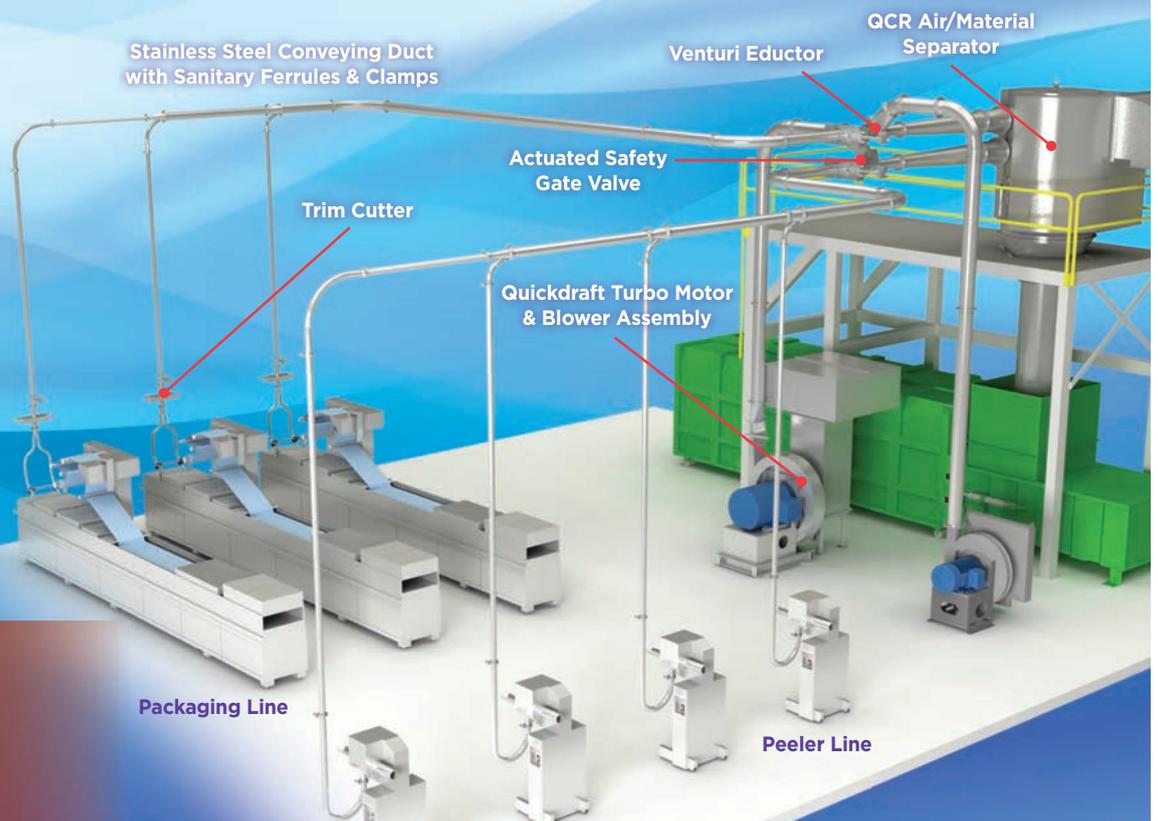
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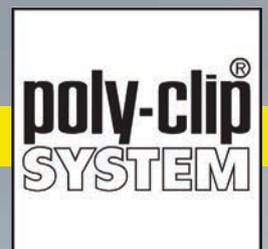
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“Jobs we’re replacing (with automation and robotics) are less than ideal jobs that many people avoid.” – CRAIG SOUSER

equipment for sausage, frankfurters, poultry, seafood, prepared foods, bakery and cheese products. The company has committed to automation and robotics in a big way. JLS was started in 1955 by Joseph L. Souser and his wife Polly, as a manufacturer’s representative firm.

The business reinvented itself in 1993, moving into packaging automation. By then, Souser’s son Craig was running the company, and is the CEO and president today. Twelve years ago, the company became involved in the food industry. The company moved into robotics and found niches that it could move into to provide automation in packaging, including robotics. One major niche area JLS moved into was meat. Over the past few years, the staff doubled in size and during the past year, doubled its revenues.

“The meat industry wasn’t too involved in automation yet, nor robotics, so the partnership with Reiser became very helpful,” he says. The company works with very large to small processors. For example, JLS created a robotic machine for a processor with 20 people on a dedicated line, that was one of their first chub loaders.

Souser says JLS does the design and the assembly of their robotics, but the frames themselves are fabricated elsewhere. “We put everything together here,” he notes. Integrating robotics into meat and poultry plant environments that are physically challenging takes a lot of work. “Since often the plant workers need help with technology, JLS provides a lot of service to the processors. We maintain remote access to our equipment, so we can help them if need be,” he says. “We have a ‘JLS View’ that’s like an ‘augmented reality’ – which means we can be at the machine with the operator remotely. We can insert videos to help the workers know what to do.”

The head of JLS says the changing ways people buy food in grocery stores, the rise of meal kits, and other developments puts pressure on processors and others to make changes of their own, including more automation in production. “We’re being challenged with new applications – a lot of pressure is being put on the supply chain,” he says.



JLS maintains remote access to its equipment so that processors using the robotics can get assistance and service if needed.

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The advantage of using robotics in processing operations includes reduction in labor and higher product yield.

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Souser also says that automation, including robotics, is solving problems the meat industry faces, like working conditions. “Jobs we’re replacing (with automation and robotics) are less than ideal jobs that many people avoid – like slicing up sausage and sticking it in a thermoform all day long,” Souser says. He refers to an unnamed plant in the Midwest that has 800 workers, but there are 1,000 openings. So, 200 workers are missing every day.

Another issue is food safety. “Robots don’t sneeze, they don’t get head colds,” he notes. “Processing companies don’t have to worry about smocks or gloves getting dirty or torn or contaminated.”

Souser says robots in meat plants are designed for agility. One designed to be agile is its Talon pick-and-place packaging system. It’s designed to integrate with other packaging machinery.

In 10 years of offering automation, there have been considerable technology gains in the food industry, according to Waheed Chaudhry, Automation Technical Product Manager at Multivac Inc. in Kansas City, Missouri. One reason meat moves slower toward automation is the level of regulation enforced by the US Dept. of Agriculture.

The company has its own line of robots, vision systems, product loading devices and conveyors, Chaudhry says. “Regarding robots, we offer more than 25 models of 2, 3 and 4 axis delta kinematics robots, complete with customized grippers and control schemes that can load hot dogs and sausages.

“The advantages of robotics include labor cost reduction, fewer employee breaks or sick call-ins, higher product yield and hygienic product handling,” Chaudhry points out. He notes that automation in packaging can be used by large and small processors.

Provisur Technologies provides belt and conveyor automated loading systems for meat and poultry processors. “The equipment is provided for general company use, but is often customized to specific applications,” says Brian Sandberg, global product manager for the company based in Mokena, Illinois.

There have been three main benefits from automation: the reduction of manual labor, an increase in food safety due to less product handling by people, and plant operation and processing at higher speeds, Sandberg says. While food safety may not be the No. 1 goal of automation in the meat industry, sometimes it’s the main beneficiary. “If you can avoid one recall, which can be a disaster for a company, it’s like buying insurance,” Sandberg says. He thinks adoption of innovative technology tends to be slower in the meat industry because of the large number of existing plants, instead of new and “greenfield” plants. “We tend not to be ‘first adopters,’” he says of some processors. 



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LONE STAR LINKS

A sausage-centric barbecue business thrives-deep in the heart of Texas

BY JOEL CREWS | jcrews@sosland.com

“When you’re in central Texas and you say ‘sausage,’ it means beef sausage.”

— BRYAN BRACEWELL

Big hair, high school football and barbecue are synonymous with Texas culture, and when it comes to Lone Star cuisine, sausage is a coveted subculture all its own. At Southside Market and Barbeque Inc., what started as a modest one-man operation over a century ago, is an iconic restaurant brand that’s gone large with two locations and a rich history of sausage production. The “Market” part of the company name isn’t just a moniker as Southside started as a butcher shop and its restaurants still sell products from retail meat cases at the eateries. The original restaurant in Elgin, Texas, sits adjacent to its dedicated sausage-processing plant and those sausage products are mainstays on its menus and in a growing number of grocery store chains and foodservice outlets.

The Bracewell family’s journey in the meat business and, indeed, in the sausage segment dates to 1882, when William Moon founded

the company, which was basically a butcher delivery service.

“He slaughtered cattle and pigs out in the country and then delivered fresh meat door-to-door in town from a horse-drawn buggy, says Bryan Bracewell, third-generation owner of Southside Market. At the end of each day, Moon would take whatever was leftover and make smoked barbecue and sausage to avoid spoilage, because in that era there was no refrigeration.

“That’s kind of how the sausage was born,” Bracewell says. Four years later Moon opened a storefront in downtown Elgin on what was then known as South Street. The small-town butcher sold fresh meats in the front of the store and sausage and smoked meats in the back, still using what was leftover from the day’s business just as he did four years earlier.

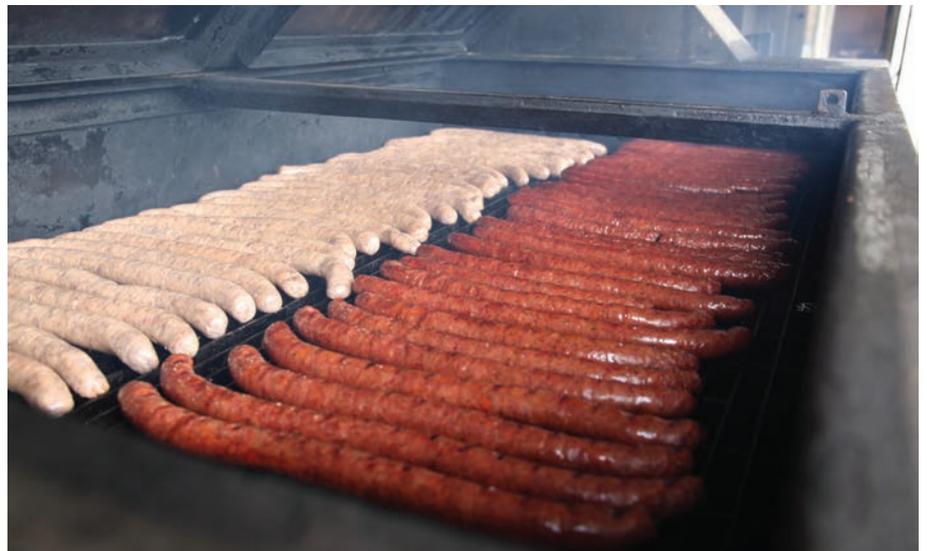
That store endured and changed hands about four times before Bracewell’s grandfather, Ernest Sr., who called on the store as a salesman for what was then known as Armour & Co., decided to buy it in 1968. The shop was famous for its sausage in those days, but Bracewell says his grandfather swore the recipe wasn’t written down anywhere and the product was always



created “by touch and feel,” by the guys in the butcher shop. After months of looking over the shoulder of these sausage masters, Ernest scribbled notes while watching and learning the techniques for sausage making. Bud Frazier was the longtime sausage maker Bracewell still credits with maintaining Southside’s sausage prowess before and after his family bought the business as he worked with the company for nearly 70 years.

“The integrity of the sausage recipe was as good as Bud’s memory,” Bracewell says. One constant with the company’s sausage, and most of the sausage made in Texas is that it is always all-beef and stuffed in natural pork casings. As for other ingredients, “here in central Texas, the two main ingredients we use on our beef is salt and pepper blended with coarse-ground beef,” he says, and that continues to be the basis for the spices used in Southside’s sausage today.

Bracewell’s father, Billy, started working in the business at the ripe age of 12. Just like his father, Bracewell first began his career there in 1988, at the very same age. About six years later, after graduating from high school, Bracewell stepped away from the business to earn his bachelor’s degree in food science,



specializing in meat, at Texas A&M Univ. in College Station, prior to there being a meat science program. While there, he learned the science behind some of what the company was doing and, in some cases, what it could do better. Besides learning plenty about the craft, he still has fond memories of the instructors, most of whom are still teaching there, and the immense value of the hands-on training and the value of those relationships today.

With two successful barbecue restaurants in central Texas, one meat is the obvious favorite at Southside. “We’re proud of our brisket, ribs and everything else we serve,” Bryan Bracewell says, “but to us sausage is center of the plate.”



While its menu includes brisket, ribs and chicken, Southside Market's mainstay is its all-beef sausage.

"We're proud of our brisket, ribs and everything else we serve but to us, sausage is center of the plate."

— BRYAN BRACEWELL

When he returned to Elgin, with a bright and shiny diploma in hand and a bundle of ideas to implement his education in a way to make the family business soar, Bracewell got a reality check. "I didn't get to just implement all the changes that I felt like we needed to have right away," he says. "We're a normal family business," he says, and he quickly realized that he had to respect the legacy that had been built by the two generations he was now working alongside. But little by little, he convinced his father and grandfather of many small changes.

"Not without a little bit of moaning and groaning they would eventually let me implement what I felt was right," and during the process he learned the truth behind the adage of begging for forgiveness being easier than asking for permission, "and a lot quicker too," he says.

CHANGE FOR GOOD

In those days, about 95 percent of the sausage sold by Southside to retailers was fresh and distributed in 50-lb. bulk boxes. As the market changed, "I felt like we needed to evolve as well so I started taking our same sausage recipe and smoking it and making links for case-ready packaging," Bracewell says.

In the late 1980s, Bracewell's grandfather had purchased what was formerly a bank building near a busy highway in Elgin. In 1992, the company's former slaughter plant "out in the country," was where it made its sausage and was the same building the company was founded in 110 years before. The company moved to the transformed building as well as moving its downtown restaurant to the location adjacent to US Highway 290. The move was

scrutinized at the time by many people, but the additional exposure has benefitted the company with as many as 30,000 cars per day passing by the eatery. The business went on to grow exponentially in the new location with the restaurant, market and its federally inspected processing facility operating on the same piece of property. With the new setup, sales and distribution became a point of emphasis, with Bracewell's wife becoming the company's first sales representative, successfully calling on high-profile retailers, including HEB and Walmart. "That's when we started getting our case-ready smoked sausages on the shelves, in the early 2000s," Bracewell says. A second restaurant was built, from the ground up, in 2014 in nearby Bastrop, Texas.

The Southside processing plant spans about 15,000 sq. ft. and employs upwards of about 30 workers working a single shift. The plant processes up to 2 million lbs. of sausage per year, much of which is sold at the Southside restaurants. The plant serves as the receiving location for all of the whole-muscle products served at the company's two restaurants, where it is trimmed and seasoned before being shipped to the restaurants, where cooking is done on site.

It isn't uncommon for the restaurant in Elgin to sell 1,400 lbs. on any given Saturday, according to Bracewell, who bought the business from his grandparents in 2010. While units sold have increased through the years, poundage doesn't necessarily increase, but the top-selling item has always been the company's Original Beef Sausage, also known as "hot guts," flavor. The No. 2 seller is the 1882 Beef Sausage, which reinfused the original hot and spicy ingredients from the early days of the company that was toned down until 2007. All of the company's sausage are stuffed in natural pork casings. Southside also offers two flavors of summer sausage and smoked beef jerky, all of which is also available on its website. A new offering known as a Sausage Slammer is one-half of a jalapeño pepper that is stuffed with cheese and wrapped in pork sausage as well as bacon.

HISTORY MATTERS

"For as long as I can remember, we made more sausage than we could slaughter," Bracewell says. "I grew up going to the feedlot with my



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grandpa on Monday afternoons and picking up cattle and calves that we would slaughter on Tuesday morning and that would be the meat for our butcher shop for that week. But predominantly the sausage came from boxed meat,” he says.

When the operations moved to the former bank building location, Southside transitioned to all boxed beef from feedlot cattle to supply the butcher shop. At that point the company cut back to only doing custom slaughtering for local customers. “In August of 2002, I shut down the slaughter plant,” he says, which was a tough decision for all three generations of operators. Bracewell’s logic was: “We’ve got to concentrate on what we do really well and that’s making sausage and barbecue and I’d rather concentrate my efforts on making sausage and barbecue.”

In the early days, Bracewell considered the family business to be a butcher shop that sold barbecue on the side. When his grandfather became involved in 1968, the locally popular sausage became regionally popular and that spawned distribution to a wider swath of customers. “That’s when we became more of a sausage business,” he says.

“Nowadays, on the retail side I tell people we used to be a meat market that sold barbecue on the side. Now I tell them we’re a barbecue joint that sells fresh meat on the side and we’ve continued to grow our distribution business of sausage.

“For us, even in the restaurant, it’s all about sausage,” Bracewell says. “We’re proud of our

brisket, ribs and everything else we serve but to us sausage is center of the plate.”

One of the company’s signature t-shirts reads: “We’ve got sausage and things that go good with sausage.”

“When you’re in central Texas and you say ‘sausage,’ it means beef sausage,” he says.

MAINTAINING TRADITION

As for the Southside recipe, Bracewell says simple is the secret ingredient. “We just say it’s a Texas barbecue sausage,” he says. “It’s not very highly engineered, made fresh daily and we smoke it the same day or the next day in the restaurant.” With two locations in the region, he says the top-selling menu item is easily sausage. “About 50 cents of every dollar we sell is sausage.”

Today’s retail offerings have flip-flopped from the days when Bracewell first joined, with over 95 percent of products sold being smoked and less than 5 percent fresh. The shift reflects the changing buying patterns of today’s consumers as well as the popularity of Southside’s online offerings, which is made up almost entirely of fully cooked items and available through its website as well as through retail giant, Neiman Marcus and on Amazon. Manufacturing and order fulfillment and shipping is done in-house and Bracewell says it has become a viable part of the company’s business. Retail distribution has grown to Walmart stores in five states and central and north Texas-based HEB stores. Sysco distributes to foodservice customers that ship to destinations including Legoland in San Diego, MOJO BBQ restaurants in Florida and more restaurants up the East Coast. Accentuating shelf life with case-ready packaging helped facilitate the increased distribution.

In 2007, the company celebrated its 125th anniversary by rolling out five new flavors of sausage, including four that were either pork blends or all pork. Prior to that, “we had only sold one flavor and it was either fresh or smoked,” and all of it was beef. Diversifying meant adding some pork into the offerings, but Texans are all about the beef.

“We sell some pork sausage,” Bracewell says, “but the reality is we do business in Texas and in Texas people eat beef. Beef sausage is king around here.” 

The sausage served at Southside’s two restaurants is available at a growing number of retail outlets, including HEB stores in Texas and Walmart. The mainstay sausage is all-beef, but five other flavor profiles were recently rolled out.



Southside Market and Barbecue Inc.