Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Bernie's owner Steve Bennett prides himself on sausage skills he learned from a Polish in-law

When Steve Bennett is smoking sausage or bacon, a sweet smoke wafts through the air around Bernie's Fine Meats in downtown Port Washington, just as it has for 71 years.

Bennett, the third butcher and sausage maker to own the establishment started by Bernie Skeris in May 1941, puts the emphasis on making a variety of fresh and smoked sausages and bacons, a craft he learned from his wife's uncle, a Polish emigrant who owned a small butcher shop in Milwaukee.

When he bought Bernie's in 2005 from John Salchert, who owned it for 31 years — both men are frequently called Bernie — Bennett fulfilled a longtime goal.

"I always wanted to own my own business, but I didn't know what," Bennett said. "It hadn't found me yet. This business found me."

Bennett, 37, earned a degree in business finance from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and worked in the financial world until he bought Bernie's.

He quit his lucrative job as an accounts manager for ICM Corp. in Milwaukee to become a sausage maker. His wife Sandy works for Thomson Reuters in Milwaukee. They have three children, Samantha, 6, Sydnee, 3, and Scott, 2.

"It started when I met my wife Sandy and her uncle (Frank Jakubczak). He was in the sausage business and has this tiny place. On Saturday mornings, there would be a line out the door," said Bennett, who was 25 at the time. "I would help out on weekends if they needed me.

"I fell in love with it right away."

He loved every aspect of the craft — the aroma when he stepped into the shop, the customers who shared stories, the fragrant spices and the wood and sawdust used in the smoking process.

Although working in high finance and making sausages seems worlds apart, Bennett said there is a lot of math involved in his new calling.

"It's x amount of spices to x amount of meat," Bennett said. "It is an art, but it's also an equation.

"I always loved cooking with my mom and experimenting with spices."

Bennett considered buying Jakubczak's business, but the uncle wasn't ready to retire and the young man was eager to jump into his life.

His wife saw the small ad placed by Salchert in a newspaper. Bennett had not been to Port Washington before checking out the business opportunity.

"I came here and saw Bernie's, and it was eerie. It felt like home the moment John started walking me through the place," Bennett said.

Bennett bought Bernie's recipes, some of them from Skeris, who died in 2002. He also had recipes from Hoffmann's Meat Market in Cedarburg that were given to him when that business closed.

"I merged them and invented my own," Bennett said. "I would take spices from one and add it to the other. I never stop evolving. Every year, I invent a different sausage or product.

"My goal was to make it a sausage shop with a full butcher shop and European market. We wanted to bring that ambience to the business. Even though I'm younger, I like to keep things old-fashioned."

His sausages outsell butchered products, which used to be the biggest draw for customers.

“People enjoy the product, and that’s what keeps you smiling,” Bennett said. “They try something and come back and say, ‘That’s the best brat I’ve ever had,’ or the best bacon.”

Every holiday is good for business, he said, but the Christmas season is by far the busiest time of the year. More than 1,000 gift boxes are sold, many of them shipped throughout the United States. Customers have also shipped them to soldiers serving overseas.

Once the holiday rush is over, Bennett starts experimenting with new sausages or products. Last year, he added a chicken wings brat to the sausage case. This year, he’s vacillating between an apple cinnamon sausage or a cranberry sausage with cheese or bacon. He’s not sure which one will end up next to the other varieties of bratwurst he makes.

The original brat, which he tweaked many times, is the best seller, Bennett said.

Bennett makes six kinds of bacon that range from a hot, spicy Hungarian to flavorful apple or cherry wood to the milder old-fashioned bacon. He sells 500 to 600 pounds of bacon a week to retail and wholesale customers.

“I was at BaconFest at the Harley-Davidson Museum and people told me I had the best bacon there,” Bennett said.

There will be extra corned beef for St. Patrick’s Day and Bennett plans to sell Reuben sandwiches on Friday and Saturday, March 16 and 17.

Extra fresh and smoked Polish sausage for Easter are also in the works.

“When I first came here, I made 100 pounds of fresh Polish sausage and sold only 30 pounds. I gave away 70 pounds to family and friends,” he said.

“Now, I sell 1,000 pounds in the one week before Easter.”

He also has frozen meat and cabbage-filled pirogies, a Polish dumpling popular during Lent.

Bennett usually makes small batches of fresh sausage every other week and freezes what doesn’t sell.

His smokehouse, where he makes 100 pounds of smoked sausage a week, is fired most days.

In addition to summer sausage, long, thin landjaeger sausage is also popular.

Bennett’s smoked meats cure for 48 hours before being smoked for hours, depending on the product. He uses hickory wood, with maple, oak, apple and cherry for speciality items. Sawdust, which is needed to make the smoke, is from maple, oak and hickory for summer sausage and bacon and pure hickory for other smoked products.

“The brick smokehouse is the secret ingredient,” Bennett said. “It has so many years of use, it has its own flavor. If I took that away, you would know immediately.”

The brick smokehouse is a bygone gem that will probably disappear someday. Commercial smokehouses must now be made of stainless steel, Bennett said.

Beer, wine and European items, which include condiments, candy, jams and soups, are also popular at the shop, he said.

The backbone of his business is the wholesale market — restaurants and grocery stores.

“I want to say thanks to all the local restaurants who continued doing business with me when I took over for John. They stuck by me through the transition,” Bennett said. “They’re the reason Bernie’s is successful.”

Customers often ask how to cook brats.

“Let them simmer for 15 minutes in water, then grill on a charcoal grill until golden brown,” Bennett said. “I like to taste the sausage, not the charcoal.

“If someone wants the beer and onion flavor, then buy my beer-and-onion brat.”

Image Information: Steve Bennett has a business degree, but he’s built his career on the ancient craft of sausage making and smoking in downtown Port Washington. Photo by Sam Arendt