

BY: JEN KOCHER PHOTOS: TAYLOR HELTON



KEEPER OF THE SECRETS

THIRD-GENERATION SAUSAGE MAKER KEEPS FAMILY TRADITION ALIVE,
PROVIDING CENTURY-OLD CLASSIC POLISH RECIPES AND OTHER FAVORITES

By 9 a.m., the andouille sausage

was ready for the smoker as Deanna Ware hosed out the industrial-sized, stainless-steel mixer that had just churned out 100 pounds of specialty Legerski sausage. Ware stepped gingerly across the freshly scrubbed cement floor to the linking machine, where she helped co-worker Nikki Goodchild finish hanging the dozens of freshly cased sausages on hooks like necklaces.

Hulking stainless steel machines gleamed under the fluorescent lights in the white room, including a huge meat grinder that turns the big slabs of pink pork shoulder into thin ribbons of meat. There's no wondering what goes into Legerski sausage, Ware said, and one need not be wary about body parts or organs. Here it's top-grade pork shoulder only.



THE RECIPES

Down the hall in a large closet, owner Jimmy Legerski hunched over a bowl, mixing spices with both hands. Rows of restaurant-sized plastic containers lined the shelves in front of him as he talked about the centuries-old family recipe that came with his great-grandfather from Poland.

Like big-named fast food chains, Jimmy carefully guards the family recipes that go back three generations and have made Legerski's legendary in the community for nearly a century. Over the years, many people have tried – and failed – to replicate their Polish sausage and other family recipes that are hand scrawled on loose bits of notebook paper inside a battered leather binder. The recipes stay with him at all times unless he goes on vacation, at which point, they're transported to a fireproof safe.

He might be a little over the top, Jimmy



admitted as he returned a jumbo-sized tub of garlic onto the shelf, but these recipes date back to his great-grandfather George, who immigrated to Sheridan in the early 1920's where he worked as a butcher at Acme. About a decade later, George opened Legerski Meats in 1931, which operated in Monarch until 1963, when they purchased the Sheridan Meat Company. That shop closed in 1986 and the three went in separate directions, with one brother becoming a cattle buyer, one running a meat packing plant, and the other brother, George, opening up a sausage store at his home. After 10 years of working with his uncle George, Jimmy inherited the store following George's passing and moved it back downtown to re-open as Legerski's Sausage in 2012.

"Lots of people remember my family," he said, "especially George. There's stories about how people felt odd going out to his home to buy an item but also how good it was."

STEPPING UP

In some ways, Jimmy represents the reluctant third generation. As a young buck, Jimmy never intended to go into the family business. After high school, he moved to Salt Lake City for seven years where he worked in mineral and water exploration but returned home in 1995 when his wife was pregnant with their first child. The couple wanted to raise their children in a small community, Jimmy said, and once home, he bought a parking lot maintenance company and striped parking lots for the next 20 years.

When George started to get up in years, Jimmy stepped in to help with most of the heavy

work, now made much easier by modern inventions. When George passed, Jimmy didn't want to see the family business pass into new hands or go obsolete.

As he puts it, somebody had to step up and do it.

"None of my 20 cousins wanted any part of it," he said with a grin as he carried the bowl of spices down the hall to be dumped into the vat of freshly ground sausage.



THE GIRLS

Ware hit a button, and the spices began slowly folding into the sausage as the large steel arm turned. She's been doing this for the past six years, joining the company just a few months after Jimmy opened while Goodchild hired on just over a year ago. Jimmy's youngest son Dalton, a college student, helps with deliveries in this small, laid-back operation.

For Ware, who doesn't even eat sausage, it's not about feeding herself as much as it is working for a guy and family she really likes as well as producing a product that makes her proud to be a part of.

"I love the family tradition," she said, recounting the lineage and the work that Jimmy has put into the operation over the years to get them to this point. "I wanted to work somewhere

that means something and for people who care."

Goodchild agreed.

"He's real big on family," she said, "and is just a super nice guy."

JIMMY'S TOP 3 PICKS FOR COOKING A POLISH SAUSAGE?

1. DEEP FRIED
2. IN A CREAM CAN DINNER
3. CUT IN HALF AND MICROWAVED UNDER A SLICE OF AMERICAN CHEESE

NOTE: Don't boil it; you lose all the flavor



JIMMY'S FAVORITE LEGERSKI PRODUCT? ITALIAN – NOT POLISH – SAUSAGE

LOYALTY TRADITION

Most days, the group sits down at the 50s-style Formica table in the front of the store and eat lunch together under the row of awards and family photos on the wall, next to the big glass deli case filled with steaks, jerky and rows and rows of sausage and jars of pickled Polish sausage.

New to the case is Jimmy's homemade sauerkraut that he's spent the last several weeks perfecting in big, 20-gallon and larger ceramic crocks in the storage room in back of the store. He uses the big mixer to stir the cabbage and salt,

and when it's ready to go into the crock, Ware puts on a pair of sanitized boots and stomps it down to pack it in place at which point Jimmy covers it with a layer of cabbage leaves and plastic bag of water to keep it tamped down.

It's pretty perfect, Jimmy admitted pinching a taste from a plastic tub. Polish sausages go best with sauerkraut, he noted, so he's glad to now offer that too.

As far as sausage goes, on average he and his small team produce about 1,800 to 2,000 pounds of per week. They're also a USDA-approved state facility, so they can sell cut steaks, hot dogs, and freshly ground burger. Locally, he sells his sausage and hamburger to many restaurants in Sheridan and throughout the county. As a general rule, he doesn't sell it to chains or convenience stores, with the exception of Farmers Co-Op on Coffeen.

Everybody gets the same price, he said, no matter how much or little they buy, a business philosophy that has cost him a few customers along the way, but it doesn't bother him. He's also picky about who he sells to and how they serve it, and when he goes out to eat, he typically buys his own product.

"People tease me about that," he said with a smile, "but how else will I know if they're serving it right?"

He doesn't want it burnt or under some weird sauce, he pointed out. He and his family are protective of their products and their reputation for great tasting, consistently quality meats.

"I feel loyal to the tradition," he said with a shrug. "It kinda makes you proud."

By: *Jem* C. Kocher