

In photo: Founders, Alois and Herta Wagenhammer

50 Years in the Making: Wagener's Meat Products

By: Heather Nahatchewitz, Marketing and Communications Director

What started as a store front on Bloor Street in 1966, founded by Alois and Herta Wagenhammer, Wagener's Meats is now a thriving provincial FSMP conducting solely wholesale operations at the facility on Six Point Road, Toronto.

My first question after sitting down with Stephanie Wagenhammer, was to ask her role in the family business. Her answer was simple, "We don't really have roles here. If I'm needed in the back, I go to the back. I go where I'm needed to get the work done." A graduate from the business program at McMaster, Stephanie is the youngest of the family and together with her older brother, Orry, they represent the third generation in the business. Orry attended Dalhousie for business also, the siblings already knowing they would be going into the family business. "This is how we grew-up," says Stephanie. "It's our pride and joy. Normally kids grew up playing on play grounds but we played here, coming in with mom and dad on weekends. At family get-togethers we don't talk about politics or religion - we talk about meat."

For a very brief period, all three generations had the privilege of working together as a family. Now, led by second generation Peter and Claudia Wagenhammer, the second and third work to honour the footprints of Alois and Herta and continue to strive forward with the legacy they left behind.

Original recipes were created in Austria by Alois and are still used today, coupled by new recipes developed by Peter with input from the rest of the team. What started with 25 products now tops 200 fifty years later. Peter himself went over to Austria in 1977 to apprentice and learn specifics about the trade. For their part, in addition to business degrees, Stephanie worked at Wiberg Canada and Orry at Wiberg Austria to become more familiar with the meat business while allowing them time to decide whether they had the passion needed to be in the meat business.

How do they make it work? "We have respect for one another. We are a very close family and it works for us. We get along very well and our skills complement each other."

When asked about staff, Stephanie couldn't say enough. "Without them we have nothing. We want people to be happy and want to come to work. Our pride is our people." Twenty-four strong, some have been there 40+ years, seeing the second and third generations grow and join the business.

"Finding staff can be challenging," she adds. "Fortunately for us, the turnover here is low, but as long term employees begin to retire it's hard to find people to take their spots. How

do you easily replace someone that has worked here their entire adult life? They are family."

On the other end of the gamut, Wagener's has no problem finding customers. "We are blessed with our customers. They love our stuff as much as we do. We often send them new products to sample as we trust their feedback. They want us to succeed."

Wagener's niche is selling into specialty delis across Ontario, from the smallest butcher to high end independent chain stores. "Our customers are loyal and we have mutual respect across the board. Some customers have been buying from us since Bloor Street."

All processing equipment in the plant is imported from Germany including a new smokehouse being installed this year with state of the art technology. "Demand is growing and we need to meet the needs of our customers."

Their bacon may be one of the most popular items but Wagener's forte is fermented salami. "That's where it all started. When people taste our products, they know it. They know its Wagener's salami."

Their Tiroler Schinkenspeck (an Austrian-style 'prosciutto') is Stephanie's personal favourite. A dry cured pork product, it's less salty and with a rich aroma. Made with a six week process (the longest), Stephanie adds, "It's a beautiful product, and tastes amazing served on a platter or just on its own. It's decadent but I could eat it every day."

Given her relatively young age, it seemed ridiculous to ask Stephanie what she would tell her younger self if she could. But her answer was articulate and perhaps beyond her years, "I would tell myself to be happy with my choices. I made the right choices. I found my calling. It takes a strong woman to work in the meat industry. You have to love it or you might as well get out. I wish my grandparents could see us now as it would make them so proud."

"OIMP membership is important because it brings us all together. It gives us a safe space where we can congregate and talk. We're such a small playing field we need to stick together."

- Stephanie Wagenhammer

Wagener's business values are simple. "It's important to stand by what you're selling. If I wouldn't put it on my dinner table, I wouldn't sell it to other people. Hard work pays off. Respect pays off. In this industry you have to be level-headed. You have to do what you have to do to provide the customers what they want - the best product."

"Seeing it all come together is the best part," says Stephanie. "Even if something goes wrong it's an opportunity to ask what happened. What can we do about it? What did we learn?"

Hearing constructive criticism and being able to rise to the challenge gives us a chance to make us better."

With a solid 50 years already behind them, Wagener's Meat Products will continue to head for new heights of continued success. The authentic European style products will remain customer favourites, and with such a dedicated,



proud, and hard-working family, the legacy of quality that the Wagener's name carries will remain a family tradition for many more years to come.

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