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Miracle Cure

Letting air and nature do most of the work, Salumeria Biellese in Hackensack produces acclaimed sausages and hams just like in the Old Country.

Posted January 16, 2012 by [Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco](#)

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The owners of Salumeria Biellese. From left, Fouad Alsharif, Paul Valettutti and Marc Buzzio.

Photo by Jason Varney.



Photo by Jason Varney.

Since the beginning, at least 80 years ago, the sausages at Salumeria Biellese have always been made by hand. That includes tying a length of string to seal each link—which isn't as simple as it sounds. As a kid growing up in the business, Marc Buzzio practiced by tying knots on a pine dowel. "If the pine got creased, it meant the knot was too tight, which would make the casings rip," Buzzio says. "If you ripped the casing, you were pissing away money." Too loose was just as bad, as Paul Valettutti learned when he joined Biellese in 1980. "Like Goldilocks—it had to be just right," he says.

"Just right with no exceptions," could have been the motto of Salumeria Biellese since the day Buzzio's father, Ugo, founded the business in Manhattan in 1925. In the early 1960s Ugo and his partner were joined by Piero Forio, Valettutti's eventual father-in-law, and a fourth partner. They ran the business with a love for tradition—and sometimes a frosty silence.

By the 1980s, when Buzzio and Valettutti were emerging as the next generation, the meat industry was in thrall to mass production, never the mission of Salumeria Biellese. But to Buzzio, "we thought the world had passed us right by." So he and Valettutti went to the elders with a proposal to switch from slow string tying to quick-lock metal clips applied with a pneumatic stapler.

"They didn't even answer you," says Valettutti, adding, "They were tough cookies." The young men were not deterred. "We proposed a lot of things," says Buzzio, now 58. In response, the elders would simply laugh or mutter dismissals in Italian, such as, "Poor lost bird," or "My shoes are smarter than you."

This wasn't surprising. When Valettutti, now 55, first joined the firm, more than a year passed before he was allowed to tackle even menial tasks like rinsing the natural casings. "You'd watch, but you couldn't touch," he says. But he came to see the wisdom of this slow indoctrination. "Over time, you develop your palate and your sensory perception," he says. "It's not something that you learn in just a year."

Lined with nondescript industrial low-rises, Park Street in Hackensack could never be mistaken for a Mediterranean hill town. But step inside number 234 and close your eyes, and the funky aroma of curing meat just might make you wonder whether you've been transported to a bucolic Italian farmhouse replete with sausages hanging from the rafters.

This former marine electronics warehouse is the production hub of Salumeria Biellese, a retailer and wholesaler of traditional Italian salumi—what the French call charcuterie. Here, 3,000 to 4,000 pounds of beef and pork per week—compared to 10,000 pounds per shift at big commercial operations—are processed according to timeless techniques that the proprietors—Buzzio, who lives in Harding; Valettutti, who lives in Mahwah; and Fouad Alsharif, who lives in Northvale—refuse to abandon.

Salumeria Biellese sausages, hams and other products boast an enviable roster of clients across the country, including the Manhattan establishments of chefs Thomas Keller, Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Mario Batali—and, on this side of the Hudson, Chakra, Elements, Eno Terra, the Grand Café, Roots Steakhouse, Huntley Tavern, 3 West and Trap Rock, among other notable restaurants.

Several of the more than 30 meat varieties started out as special orders for chefs. The fennel-seeded finocchiona Tuscan salami that the company first made for Sirio Maccioni of Le Cirque now also comes in a smaller size (finocchietta). The porcini mushroom salami originally made for a Balducci's Christmas catalog is now a staple. Blue-cheese sausage was made for an Irish pub; pheasant and trompettes de la mort mushroom sausage for chef Gray Kunz. The partners are glad to fulfill the special orders, as long as they

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In 2010 Slow Food NYC awarded Salumeria Biellese its Snail of Approval for its contributions to “both the pleasures of the table and the integrity of the food chain”—the only American salumi maker to earn that honor.

“They make a superior product,” says chef/restaurateur Michael Cetrulo, who gets Salumeria Biellese meats from distributor J. Vrola of South Amboy for his restaurants, including Scalinì Fedeli in Chatham, Sirena in Long Branch and Stella Marina in Asbury Park. “I just love the texture and the flavor,” he says. “You don’t have to chew as much.” According to Tony Grande, executive chef and owner of Il Capriccio in Whippany, Salumeria Biellese succeeds because its owners “understand how this stuff is supposed to be made.”

Buzzio’s father, Ugo, was the link between Old World and New. Born to Piedmontese parents in New York, he was brought to Italy as a child after his father’s death and learned to cure meats from Mario Forio, a butcher who ran a slaughterhouse-cum-bistro in Ugo’s ancestral town of Curino in the northern province of Biella near the French border. In the mid- 1920s, Ugo returned to New York. He and a partner, Eusebio Mello, purchased a grocery store with Biellese roots in Manhattan at 28th Street and Eighth Avenue and began curing their own meats. Business boomed, and Ugo asked his old teacher, Forio, to send his son, Piero, to help him run things. Sergio Gabrielli, an employee, eventually became a partner as well.

Ugo settled in Union City. “My mother would send me in with my father on Saturdays so I’d know what he looked like,” recalls his son. “They let me make coffee. But I swore I’d never go into the business. I hated the place.”

In the 1970s, the shop’s reputation grew, but at the time it earned only about 20 percent of its income from wholesale.

The younger Buzzio, meanwhile, became a physical education teacher, coached college football and embarked on a master’s program in French at NYU. But when his father invited him to join the firm, proposing, “Try it for a year. If you don’t like it, I’ll sell it,” Buzzio bit. In 1980, Valetutti joined the company. Piero Forio’s other son-in-law, Alsharif, followed in 1992 and now handles the bookkeeping and manages Biricchino, a 68-seat restaurant adjacent to the Manhattan shop. The owners moved production to Hackensack in 2007. (The Hackensack facility has no retail store.)

Salumeria Biellese has no sales team or marketing budget; just a focus on top-quality ingredients like grass-fed Angus beef from Pennsylvania via Arcadia Farms of Short Hills; Goffie Road Farm poultry from Wyckoff; and heritage hogs like Mangalitsas (for culatello and lardo), Tamworths (for pancetta), Gloucester Oldspots (for guanciale) and Berkshire pigs (for coppa). Buzzio hopes to team with Bobolink Dairy in Milford for whey-fed Berkshires, which he favors for their sweet, well-marbled flesh. “If you’re going to dry something and there’s no fat, you’ll produce cardboard,” he says.

To make cured meats (salumi), fresh meat is ground and seasoned with sea salt and spices according to one of the 100 recipes handed down to Buzzio by his father. Sealed in plastic barrels, the meat rests at 35 degrees in a stainless-steel refrigerator for 30 to 45 days, depending on the final product. Then it’s brought to room temperature overnight and stuffed into beef casings (thinner hog or sheep casings are used for fresh sausage, which needs to be cooked before eating) and hand tied by a five-man crew working in a room with stainless-steel walls and ceiling that looks spotless enough to double as an operating theater.

The meat is hung from racks in that production area at 55 to 60 degrees overnight to allow excess moisture to drip out of the links. The next day, it hangs for 24 hours in the greening room, where the 70 degree temperature spurs the development of external mold—a sign of fermentation. From there, it’s into the 55- to 60-degree drying room—“like a wine or cheese cellar,” says Buzzio—where the sausages might hang alongside guanciale resembling slabs of tanned leather, or bristly boar thighs whose exposed surfaces are slathered in a custom coating of lard and white pepper to prevent the flesh from becoming too dry.

Five-ounce cacciatore (hunter’s cured sausage), which are the smallest in diameter, take two or three months from start to finish; a 6-pound culatell (cured pork rump) takes nine to 10 months; a 14-pound, bone-in wild boar prosciutto, about a year, says Buzzio.

Traditionally, only mortadella and capocollo are cooked (by steaming). Buzzio says that big commercial producers speed up air drying by using accelerants and temperatures as high as 110 degrees, essentially cooking them. A six- to eight-month process can thus be compressed to a week, says Valetutti.

“There are times when [Salumeria Biellese’s] product is not available because it’s just not ready yet,” says Louis Louzides, director of operations at J. Vrola, which distributes the firm’s products to restaurants, country clubs and gourmet markets. “They haven’t tried to make it work faster.”

Sticking to old-fashioned artisanal techniques is challenging in an industry regulated by the USDA, which calls for meats to be fully cooked, frozen, irradiated or treated with chemicals to ensure the elimination of bacteria. “We don’t use those methods,” Buzzio says. In danger of being shut down in 2003, his company spent \$100,000 on a validation study that proved the traditional curing process they employ is safe. “If it didn’t work, we would not be here right now,” Buzzio says. “Our ancestors would have died a long time ago.” Two more validation studies in 2009—with the same findings—cost about another \$40,000.

All this care adds to the cost of the products. “People who are just shopping price, there’s no reason for them to purchase our product,” says Valetutti. “We want people who are motivated by the knowledge of food.”

Buzzio eschews the easy way because “then you become like everybody else.” His generation did dramatically increase the wholesale trade, which these days accounts for about 95 percent of the business, he says. Now the next generation is making its mark. Valetutti’s son Paulie, who started a Slow Foods chapter at Rutgers when he was a student there, is head chef at Biricchino, where he has introduced poultry and produce from the Garden State. One of Buzzio’s three sons, Drew, works with his father and Valetutti, overseeing operations in Hackensack.

The rebuilt website, salumeriabiellese.com, makes individual sales available online and offers organic

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The latest *Wine Spectator* Vintage Chart arrived recently as the first snow of winter was accumulating in my front yard. Given that we had a few feet of snow by this time last year, the flakes reminded me of how the weather changes from year to year.

By [Sharla Blanz](#)

Addition by Contraction

[Southern Scene](#)
2012/01/27

For the past year I’d heard rumblings that it might happen, but earlier this week the state’s plans were revealed —Rutgers-Camden is going to become part of Rowan University.

By [Nick DiUlio](#)

options. Speaking of his father and Valetutti, Drew says, "They're both more receptive to change."

His father later qualifies that statement. "When you start to lose control of the quality," he intones, "it's time to stop."

Drew knows there's no question of losing the old ways. After all, his training included plenty of knot tying.

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