

Carl's Choice Meats

Our Story

Carl started in the meat business as a butcher back in 1966 when as an 18 year old he began working for Hank deKoning in Port Dover. After a number of years and several job changes in the meat industry, Carl started working for Zehrs Markets in 1972 as a meat cutter. He worked for Zehrs for 16 years moving quickly from cutter to meat manager. Ending his employment with that grocery chain in 1988, having been the meat manager of their then newest and largest store.

Although it was in the back of our minds for many years, we started looking seriously into starting our own business in 1984. On July 1 1986, we bought and moved to our present location with our family of eight. Carl's Custom Meats as we were then called was a freezer beef operation and Carl worked extremely hard - by day an unassuming meat manager and by night (sometimes into the wee hours) owner of his very own business! The children (all six!) and Marca helped as much as age and skill level would allow. This pace however could not be kept up and in 1988 when we opened our stall at the Brantford Farmers Market, Carl quit his job with Zehrs Markets.

Things were good. Carl was busy. We started selling from the store and the customers were happy. Carl was steadily adding to the line of meat products we sold, testing and tweaking each recipe until it met his satisfaction. Our family were his willing guinea pigs.

As our selection of meat products and the business expanded so was the need for more space. Over the past years we have gradually gutted, restructured, rearranged and expanded our building, septic system and parking lot, always in consultation with the local health unit.

The Inspection Story

The first order of our business has always been to make sure that every aspect of our business - production, transportation, marketing and sanitation - was done with the input and approval of the health unit.

In the year 2000, the Ontario government, with the prompting of the meat industry, undertook to come up with new meat inspection regulations. These regulations covering all aspects of slaughter, transportation, packaging, storage, animal welfare and meat production were implemented in 2003. Until 2007 all small meat markets such as Carl's Choice Meats were inspected by the local health units. In the fall of 2007 we were granted a licence under the new regulation (Food Safety & Quality Act, 2001).

Here-in lies our present dilemma. Although through the years we have exceed the demands of the health unit, it now seems we cannot meet the new regulations as far as our smoking and further

processing is concerned. We have unfortunately therefore as of December 2008 been forced to relinquish our licence.

As late as the fall of 2008 we had surface testing done by an independent laboratory for bacteria, and some product testing done for Listeria and the like. The test results were well below the government limits. The representative from the lab was not surprised at these outcomes as he has experience in this type of testing and is familiar with many butcher shops and their results.

We are not allowed at this time to continue in the production of smoked meat. That is bacon, ham, kolbassa, smoked sausage, pepperettes etc. We have for the present gone to other meat plants to have them produce our recipes and cook our products. This has been a real struggle, for even though they have done their best, they are not us and cannot produce the same product in their facility. Sometimes it is close, but more often it is not satisfactory. Through all this trial and testing our customers have been most patient and understanding. There seems however to be no light at the end of the tunnel. It is, from a business point of view, better not to continue making these products, rather than throw out products that don't meet our standards.

Before the new regulations came into effect, we had an assessment done in January of 2006 to see how we fared in the preparedness to meet these new standards. We were told at that time we needed to add an addition to accommodate new areas for "ready to eat" processing, smoking, a lunch room, inspectors office, dry storage, receiving, a "ready to eat" cooler, and an "uneatable" cooler. The estimated cost at that time was around \$200,000.00. Today with the new requirements, the estimate is in the area of \$300,000.00. This is just not feasible and makes no financial sense. A business plan would show that unless there was a large increase in sales, which we do not foresee, there would be no payback.

Two things that need to be done

First and foremost

A smaller category than Small Free Standing Meat Plant (SFSMP) needs to be established. Presently a SFSMP licence allows a processor to produce 22,000 pounds of meat per week. There is no doubt that if we were to produce that amount of product per week we would have to increase the size of our facility! At our store we produce a maximum of 500 pounds per week. More often it is in the area of 300 to 400 pounds per week. To build a facility that can produce over 40 times as much does not make any sense. Not from a business or a sanitation point of view. It needs to be realized that places such as ours are much smaller than the category "small" in these regulations. We have a much smaller financial impact than the larger facilities, but we have a very large and important community footprint. How are we then to accommodate the MICRO or MIMI butcher shops that dot the country side? How do we ensure their continued business? How can we be of assistance in maintaining the quality and the unique flavour of the small meat producers of Ontario?

This issue is not unique to Carl's Choice Meats. It is used only as an example of what is happening. We are only at the start of the first audit cycle for meat plants such as ours, and it worries me that many other butchers will call it quits because they can no longer afford to stay in business

Second

We need to take a better look at the inspection system and how it can better serve the general public. And also how it can better serve the meat industry as a whole, even the Micro Meat processor. At present it seems the industry is serving the inspection system with very little support. We all recognize the need for inspection, but it should serve the industry not the other way around.

Case in point: We at Carl's Choice Meats were inspected by OMAFRA for 14 months prior to being forced to give up our licence. During this time the only things that were required to change was that the use of our wooden cutting tables needed to be discontinued and we were required to wear head coverings. For 14 months little else was mentioned. The day we were audited last December we were to stop our cooking and smoking immediately, due to the supposed high risk that we presented. Is this not odd that the inspector did not see this risk in the previous 14 months? That he did not mention or record any concerns?