

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Not many butchers can cut it anymore



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REGISTER COLUMNIST

Ambling about Orange County, as I am wont to do, you stumble across things, sometimes those things you haven't seen in what seems a lifetime.

Yet there it was, tucked away in a strip mall in Fullerton, its front windows plastered in bright red and black lettering that screamed the prices of

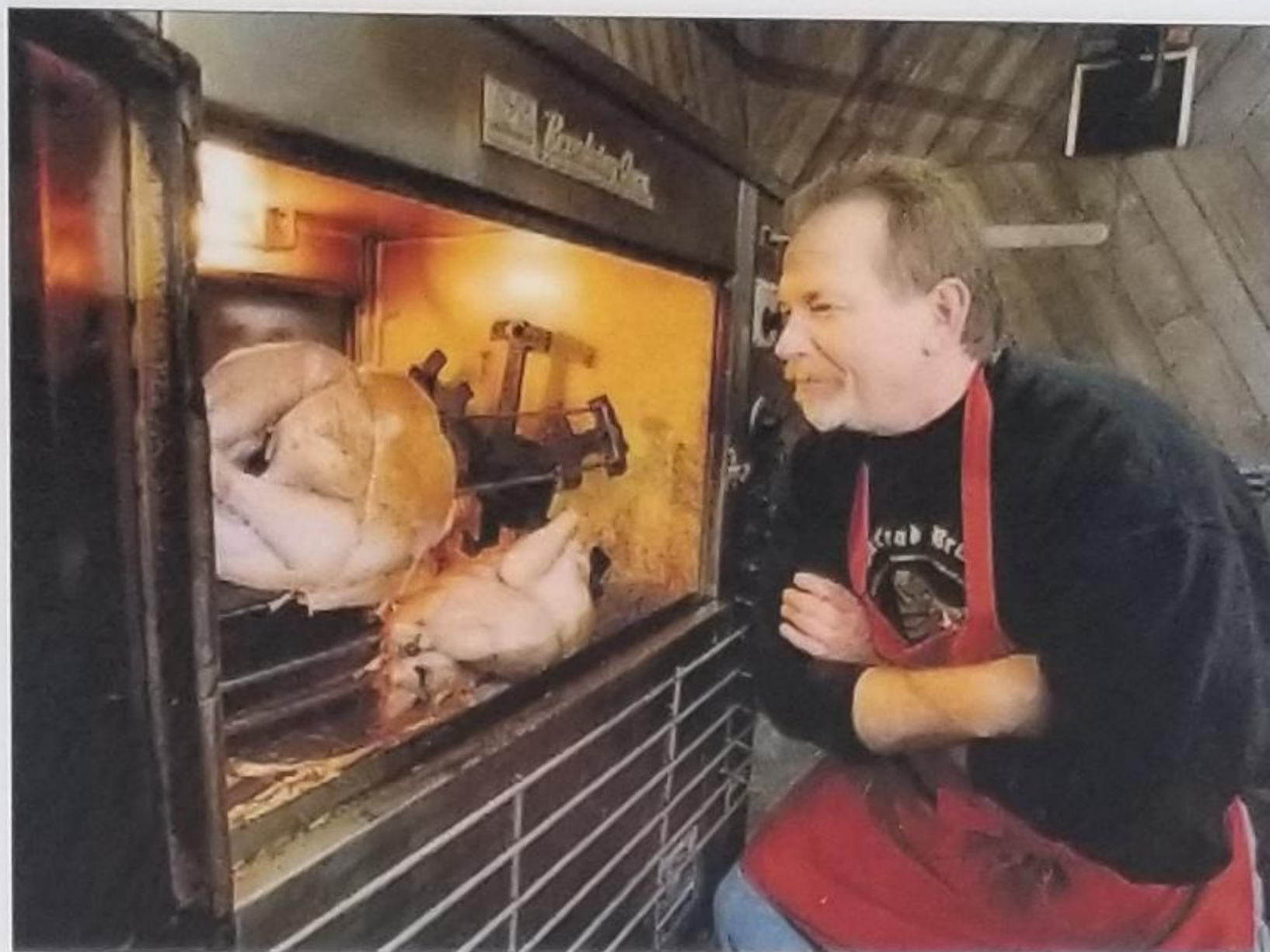
lamb, pork, beef and chicken, the way the shops of generations ago used to do it.

It was, of all things, a butcher shop.

Maybe it is just me, but I haven't seen one, much less shopped at one, since my father took me way back when John Kennedy was in office.

Anyway, come inside with me.

The first thing that you notice is different is that the big, burly men in aprons behind the huge meat displays immediately greet you warmly when you step in-



JOSHUA SUDOCK, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

"Some people just don't want the hassle of cooking a turkey, even on Thanksgiving. We don't mind the hassle," says Brad Wick, owner of Gem Meats & Produce in Fullerton.

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JOSHUA SUDOCK, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Foot traffic is steady at Gem Meats, and owner Brad Wick seems to know almost everyone who comes in. Wick suggests the taste of the meat would explain it.

JOHNSON: A rarity in O.C.

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side.

"Hello, sir. Can I help you?" they say.

Maybe, too, it is just the places I shop, but I could not tell you the last store, grocery — anywhere — where I was greeted so kindly.

When I asked to see the owner, out of a backroom walked Brad Wick, 52, a reticent sort who calls to mind a young Chuck Norris, a man whose forearms hang on either side of his apron like Smithfield hams.

It is Tuesday morning at Gem Meats & Produce, the butcher shop Wick has owned since 1993, which means he is hip-deep in turkeys, all of which will ultimately grace his clients' tables this afternoon, Thanksgiving Day.

He has already moved

more than 400 turkeys in the past three days, and he says he isn't quite done. A couple of the birds are turning on the rotisserie at the other end of the store, which he and the five other men who work the shop will later carve up and box for clients.

"Ah, some people just don't want the hassle of cooking a turkey, even on Thanksgiving," Wick explains. "We don't mind the hassle."

He is, by his own estimate, one of only three true butchers left in Orange County.

His father, Fran, owned the original Gem Meats for decades when it was in Fountain Valley, which, at the time Wick began cutting meat, was home to at least a half-dozen butcher shops, he says.

"They're all gone now," Wick says wistfully. "My

dad's old shop got torn down. It's a Sam's Club now."

For him, there was no choice, really. He was born into the business. By age 14, he was "hanging" and "breaking" full quarter slabs of beef.

"I just kind of fell into it," he says. "By the time I was 16, I was pretty good at cutting meat. Today what you have is a lot of boutique places where they have a couple of pork chops on a plate, and they call themselves a butcher shop. This here is old school."

Things really began changing in the 1980s, Wick said. The bread-and-butter of the business — housewives — were now in the workforce.

Costco and Sam's Club became their meat source. Supermarkets put in their own meat service counters.

The rough economy of the early 1990s put most shops out of business, he said. There were at least a dozen butchers in the Fountain Valley-Huntington Beach area, he added. Only the Beef Palace in Huntington Beach remains.

He arrives at work most mornings at 6:30. Quitting time is at about 7:30 p.m. Open seven days, he works most of them. Spending time with him in the shop, it is clear to see why.

He cuts and trims every piece of beef, chicken and pork that goes in his display cases, which on this day is an amount that would easily feed a small army. His five employees he allows to marinate his kabobs, carne asada and the like.

He is a true artist in the cutting room. It takes him all of maybe 3 minutes — using a combination of a band saw and his knives — to reduce a monstrously large rib roast into 10 beautifully trimmed and defatted bone-in rib-eye steaks. In another two minutes, he has assembled five beef kabobs with the trimmings.

Foot traffic into the store is steady on this morning. Wick knows almost every one who comes in. I am amazed at the number.

"You'd have to try a steak," he says. "And then you tell me."

Jennifer Asher, 44, of Placentia has come in for a prime rib roast she plans to serve her family on Thanksgiving night. She doesn't know how large it should be for seven people, or even how to cook it.

"They will tell me everything I need to know,"

she says.

True enough, Wick tells her she needs the 9.3-pound roast he has hauled out. Heat the oven to 325 degrees, season the roast, put a little water in the pan and let it go for two hours, or until the internal temperature hits 120 degrees.

Asher thanks him profusely. It is why, she says, she has been coming to him for 10 years. His meats are higher quality and just taste better than anything she could get at the supermarket, she said.

I ask him who will take over when he retires. "I'm wondering about that now," Wick answers.

Unlike his father, he has no son,

"I've got a daughter, Jennifer," he says, "and she worked here up until she went off to college. But she's not an option. This is too dirty a job for her."

Well, maybe, I say to him, if you let one of the five guys at the counter get at the meat one day or even two, maybe they could learn what you know, and you'd have someone to follow you.

Wick scrunches up his eyes and his face. He says he is starting to teach one of the young guys. Then he looks out the window.

"I don't know, I'm just going to keep on doing what I'm doing," he says.

Oh, and I did buy a couple of those rib-eyes, and laid them on the grill for my wife and me the other night.

Oh, my goodness.

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Gem Meats & Produce
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