

Getting down to casings

It's that attention to detail that has kept Fiorella's open 100 years.



Brothers Eddie and Danny Fiorella with a platter that matters.

“WE’LL BE 100 YEARS old in 1992,” says Lou Fiorella. Lou and his sons Danny and Eddie run Fiorella’s Sausage, the handsome, old, lovingly cared for antique of a butcher shop on Christian Street right near Philadelphia’s Italian Market. “And you know why we lasted? From my grandfather Luigi, to my father, John, to me, to my boys coming up now, the word always was, don’t sell what you won’t eat yourself.

“Take tripe. At one time, I used to sell more tripe than all the rest of Ninth Street put together. Then the company I bought it from fresh went out of

business. All I could get was frozen. I should sell frozen tripe?” Lou flicks his fingers under his chin, an old Italian gesture of the most bitter contempt. Lou uses it often when he talks about anything that doesn’t come up to his standards. “We’re not jeopardizing our sausage business with something might be frozen two months, two years, you don’t know how long! We got to protect our customers.

“Look, take the pork. We use Boston Butt, a better cut than the picnic, and more expensive. . . . We can’t get it good enough from one supplier,” Lou flicks his fingers under his chin, “we switch to another. Danny,

show him that pork.”

Danny triumphantly puts two different Boston Butts on the gorgeous old terra-cotta counter. “The Boston Butt is up higher on the front leg than the picnic,” he says. “It’s got more movement and less of those standing muscles. It’s tenderer. Now here’s a good butt, and another one — well, just look at it, who’d want to make sausage of that?”

They both look the same to me.

“Come on!” says Danny, slicing both in half. “Look at the color of the meat. The good one’s pale and young. Look how dark and old this other one is. And look at the fat pattern, use your

eyes, this is" — Danny looks at Eddie, Eddie looks at Lou, a family shrug — "this is *not* going in our sausage."

"Take casings," says Eddie. "My father's always sending casings back."

"Casings?" says Lou. "Give me some casings so I can show him. Now look, you can see this easy."

I look at what seem to be soft white fragile strings; Lou spreads them in his fingers.

"We use only natural casings, of course. Pork casings for the Italian and liver sausage, and lamb casings for the breakfast sausage. That other stuff is made of plastic! They call it edible? I should eat plastic?" The fingers flick the chin. "We got to get natural casings, *good* natural casings. We want our sausage to . . . *shine!* How can they shine with cloudy casings?"

"Look, look at this stuff! Wait, I can tell you're not seeing the difference. Give me some sausage, Eddie. Here's two different sausages. One is perfect. The other one? OK, it squeezes by. But you can still see a little faint milky line or two? It's hard to see, or I wouldn't have used the casings. But sometimes they're sending me casings all crazed all over with milky lines. Get rid of it! We send it back. We got four — 3½ really — casing suppliers. One main one, one in reserve, because you can't just have one supplier, he thinks he owns you. And then two more, just in case. I give them all a shot, just to keep the main guy on his toes."

Danny and Eddie take me into the spotless stainless-steel room where the sausage is made. There's a sign on the wall that says, *Return Station*. It's a family joke. "We wholesale our sausage to other stores and so it has to be federally inspected," says Danny. "And the government says you have to have a station where the inspector can look at your returns, and tell you what meat is good enough to mix into your fresh batches. Everybody

does it, the inspector tells us, all the big sausage makers; it's perfectly legal. Legal? We're going to jeopardize a hundred pounds of our sausage, mixing in five pounds of *old sausage*? Would you eat it? If you knew that's what was in it? It's like . . . Eddie, tell him about Italian sausage."

"Italian sausage," says Eddie, and laughs. ". . . It used to be we had to say *Italian Brand Sausage* on our labels; *Italian sausage* had to be made in Italy. But then, the big sausage companies decided they wanted to make Italian sausage, and things changed. Now there's a definition for Italian sausage, it has to be no more than 39 percent fat. Thirty-nine percent! You're not going to have too many Italians buying that sausage. Sausage needs fat or it won't have any taste. Our sausage has fat, 10 percent fat. But to call it Italian sausage, you also have to have fennel or anise seeds in it. The government's not saying how much; you don't have to have enough so people can taste it. But you look . . . and you'll find a couple seeds in all the Italian sausage you buy in a supermarket."

The Fiorellas are proud of their labels, which show that their sausage is made of pork, salt, spices and flavorings. "Nothing else," says Lou. "No BHT, no preservatives. No filler. No water. We hear ads . . . for sausage, made the old-fashioned way, they say, we hang them up. Yeah? They hang them up to dry because of the water in them, is why. If that's old-fashioned, though — sticking water and filler in sausages?" (Lou flips his chin with his fingers.) — "the people that did it, their stores aren't around anymore. Ours is. That's why we're celebrating our 100-year anniversary. Not celebrating it rich, maybe, but we're celebrating. You make it right, you last a century." □

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