

Quaker Creek Store



By Cheetah Haysom

The bounty of the Black Dirt region can be seen in the rich black soil, the fields of crops and the cultural character that pre-dominates in the region.

But up Pulaski Highway, by the bridge that crosses Quaker Creek, some of the bounty of Pine Island is hidden behind a simple storefront, where the grandson of a Polish settler is producing meats so fine that customers come from far and wide.

Behind the façade of the Quaker Creek store, a young man is practicing the art of charcuterie – a culinary specialty that is dying as the American food market is dominated by mass production and an emphasis on prolonging shelf-life. Robert “Bobby” Mateszewski, 35, is making sausages, and smoked and

cured meats the old fashioned way – using the finest ingredients and home-mixed herbs and spices – just as his Polish grandfather did before him.

Through his training at the Culinary Institute of America (C.I.A.), Bobby learned centuries-old methods of charcuterie and he constantly attends seminars to keep himself updated on developments in the food smoking industry. He has one of the largest libraries of magazines and books on the smoking process outside the C.I.A..

Bobby’s inspiration and mentor was his grandfather, Stanley Sobkowiak, a Polish garde manger chef, who first came to the United States in 1939 to cook at the World’s Fair. Stranded here by the outbreak of World War II, he got a job as a chef at a hotel in Atlantic City. Seven years later he brought over his daughter (Robert’s mother) and his Polish wife, Irene. But Irene yearned to be among people of her own heritage. So they moved to Pine Island, where

Stanley bought a grocery business on Pulaski Highway.

Sobkowiak wanted to start his own fine dining establishment, but because of the economic times and local tastes, his plans were inopportune. Instead, Sobkowiak ran a tavern and general store, with an emphasis on home processed meats. When Bobby was 19, his grandfather died and left him the business.

Although Quaker Creek had evolved into a convenience store, Bobby went back to his grandfather’s roots and began to train to become a garde manger – a specialty which includes canning, pickling and curing meat. As Bobby’s business grew his grandmother, Irene, lent him money to develop the meat processing side. She worked in the store until she died, aged 88, last year. But it’s still a family concern – those helping him are his mother, wife, brother, uncle, sisters and father, along with a staff of very competent employees.

Word of the quality food available at Quaker Creek soon spread and now customers travel from 65 miles away to buy from Bobby's store. Sometimes the line of people waiting to buy the Quaker Creek lunchtime specials – all made in-house – spills out into the street.

In recent years Bobby has installed the finest kitchen equipment available in the world. Below the store the gleaming Koch stainless steel smokehouse, with a microprocessor that controls heat, humidity, and time intervals, has the capacity to work 24 hours a day. There is a giant metal food processor – with the capacity to mix 200 pounds of meat – and a state of the art machine for filling sausage casings.

The old tavern, next to the store, is currently being converted into a glistening, white-walled production kitchen where Bobby plans eventually to make fine terrines and pate.

Bobby never advertised because, he says, he had all the business he needed. But several weeks ago a prominent newspaper article about his Pine Island store brought so much business that Bobby has barely caught his breath. "But

all these new customers couldn't have come at a better time", he smiles, because we have poured a large amount of capital into our business".

Bobby works every day of the week, rarely taking Sunday off. Apart from all the varieties of food he is curing or smoking at any one time, he makes a wide range of sausages. He started out making Polish sausages, but soon added a range of six Italian sausages. As requests came in, he added to his repertoire German, Portuguese, South African, North Africa, and even Chinese sausages.

His customers are people of the region who've discovered the extraordinary quality of food available at Quaker Creek, and fine food experts from afar, who've heard about him at dinner parties. Though he is a modest man, a little embarrassed about the attention he is getting, he is not shy about his standards. "I use the best quality ingredients, all available in this region. I get my herbs fresh from a grower right here in Pine Island, and mix all the seasoning myself. And I apply the very highest standards of hygiene."

"Like my grandfather," he says, "I am a gourmet." He says the word with such pride, one is

reminded that a "gourmet" is not just an adjective on a label, or a description of a self-anointed "foody". It is one of the highest credentials in the culinary arts. "It is ironic," he adds, with satisfaction, "but what I am doing is the fulfillment of my grandfather's dream".