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LIFE, MEDIA, GOSSIP, POLITICS, AND EVENTS IN DC

CAPITAL COMMENT

An Early Look at the New Wagshal's Market

The Spring Valley deli, founded in 1925, is about to give birth to its 21st-century self.

By Carol Ross Joynt



At the new Wagshal's on New Mexico Avenue, the sign (almost) says it all. Photograph by Carol Ross Joynt.

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For a certain segment of Washington—upper Northwest neighborhoods such as Spring Valley, Kent, Wesley Heights, American University park, and a few nearby Maryland suburbs, schoolkids, people attending weekend sporting events at Turtle Park, AU students, and commuters along the Massachusetts Avenue corridor—Wagshal's is part of their daily lives. They can probably tell you their first Wagshal's sandwich. I can, for sure: a #275, turkey with Russian dressing and coleslaw on rye bread. That was 1976. It's still a favorite, along with the fine BLT. Other times it's the Reuben and, like many devoted fans, the brisket. The point is, Wagshal's is beloved. I wouldn't change a thing. The owners of the store, however, are more ambitious.

In the next week, owner **Bill Fuchs** and his family will quietly begin to open their new enterprise in a building complex owned by American University that formerly housed Balducci's and has long been home to Chef Geoff's. Wagshal's next-door neighbor, sharing half the space that was Balducci's, is Roberto Donna's Al Dente. The new Wagshal's, a mile and a half from the old Wagshal's, will take the brand into the 21st century.

At first it will open for a couple of hours a day. By the end of the month the Fuchs hope to have it fully open and serving practically everything under the sun, from sunrise to sunset. The approximate hours will be 8 AM to 9 PM. A sign that hangs outside the front doors on New Mexico Avenue lists "delicatessen, breads, pastries, butcher, organic, produce, seafood," and the Fuchs are adding to the repertoire with house-made pastas and gelato, a grill for hamburgers and hot dogs, a deep fryer for latkes, indoor and outdoor seating, and table service.

The new place is subtly divided into halves. There's the market half, with the butcher and fishmonger, pastas, bakery, and refrigerated cases holding fresh vegetables, sliced meats, and Wagshal's well-known salads (chicken, egg, shrimp, tomato and mozzarella, Greek, and tuna) plus some new additions. In the back are the frozen foods (a lifesaver for anyone who has ever needed a turkey tetrazzini or beef stew in a flash; not to mention the cocktail canapés). Even an outpost of Johnson's Flower Center, another longtime family-run DC business, will have its own corner. The other half of the 4,000-square-foot space is for the restaurant, with seating, a grill, a place to stand in line for snacks and sodas, and—new technology alert—a computer screen for composing a salad that will then be brought to your table.

We made a visit Thursday afternoon while staffers were still unpacking and stocking the shelves. It was happy chaos, but it was easy to see that once everything is in its place the room will be bright and cheerful—lots of stainless steel, slate, and rough-hewn wood. Even the ceiling is detailed in an attractive terra-cotta herringbone pattern. "We knew exactly what we wanted," said **Brian Fuchs** as he gave us a guided tour. Much of the design was inspired by trips to Europe, and Foundry Architects of Baltimore worked with them to bring their ideas to life.

"All of it is custom made," said Fuchs, running his hand over a produce case from Portugal. He's particularly proud of the "jeweler-style" glass top and front of the meat display, which is waist high, making it easy for customers to see the goods and also interact with the butchers. "A very sexy kind of look," he said. "Because of these cases we're not going to do a conventional display." There will be some pre-cut meats for people in a rush, but most of the meat will be cut to order. "A lot of what we're known for, whole carcass, we're still doing," he said, "but primal cuts will be easier to manage."

We navigated the work stations between the market and restaurant sides, which includes a compact, sophisticated baking area where they hope to produce a dozen or more different breads. It's not spacious, but every inch is put to use. "We're set up for volume, but we don't have the luxury of space," said Fuchs. "That's going to be a challenge, but we're not too worried about it. We're used to working in close quarters."

Wagshal's is already a fair-sized operation. Eighty employees work in the old operation—the deli, the separate market, and the catering department. The staff will expand to 110 for the new store, and some employees will mingle in both, said Fuchs. Loyalists shouldn't worry—the Spring Valley stores are remaining open, although Fuchs expects the new place will cannibalize some customers. His father, Bill Fuchs, isn't worried. Even though the businesses are relatively close together he sees them serving different customer bases. More is more, in his view.

Full disclosure: Wagshal's feels like family to me. I've been going there for so long I know many of the staff by name and even a lot of the people whose photos adorn the walls—the Supreme Court justices and Vice Presidents, and some less-famous folks. The photos, however, are staying at the old Wagshal's.

After touring new Wagshal's on Thursday I drove over to visit the old Wagshal's and take a photo of Bill Fuchs. True to form, he would not let me leave the store without a brisket sandwich. You see, Wagshal's brisket is legendary. I asked an important question: "Will the brisket be at the new place, too?" "Yes," said Bill. Okay, all is right in the world—or at the least in the corner of the world known as Northwest DC.



Photograph by Carol Ross Joynt.



The famous signature Wagshal's brisket sandwich, which will be available at both the old and new outposts.
Photograph by Carol Ross Joynt.



In new Wagshal's, organizing the high tech produce case, company VP Brian Fuchs. Photograph by Carol Ross Joynt.



In old Wagshal's, owner and family patriarch Bill Fuchs. Photograph by Carol Ross Joynt.