

# MEAT+POULTRY

Monumental success

12/18/2014 - BY STEVE KRUT



## **Wagshal's is known for personalized customer service and gourmet foods.**

When Bill Fuchs bought an existing Washington, DC-area delicatessen named Wagshal's in 1990, the famed sandwich shop was already known as "The President's Deli." And like the overstuffed sandwiches that drew the likes of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Supreme Court Justices and House Speaker Tip O'Neill, Fuchs has kept piling it on ever since.

He added ingredients like creativity, innovation, marketing skills and a flair for presenting gourmet foods that has propelled the enterprise to become a Washington institution.

With four locations, including a newly opened indoor-outdoor restaurant, a catering division and a butcher shop/deli market, this German immigrant has grown the original deli business founded in 1925 to become one of the most famous and celebrated food businesses in the nation.

The original owner, Sam Wagshal and his 13-year-old son, Ben, took the sandwich shop to a new level when, at the end of Prohibition, he was the first in line to apply for a liquor license in the city. But when Bill Fuchs came into the picture, he tapped into something in his heritage that demonstrated leadership and vision.

"Dad came to this country speaking no English," son Aaron Fuchs explains. "He taught himself the language and then taught his parents. They were in the food business and he learned to cut meats and make sausage as a child. He says he remembers his grandfather butchered hogs in the attic. Food was their life."

The business was already famous for its ability to offer customers only the finest meats, and had a lucrative trade in catering for the many embassies that dot the city.

Bill realized the time constraints and limitations of his customer base and almost immediately introduced frozen heat-and-eat complete meals. Within a few years, he opened Wagshal's Catering and Bakery Kitchen and Wagshal's Market in the Spring Valley strip mall. In addition to the embassy trade, the catering division, directed by his sister, Silvia Alexander, moved heavily into corporate catering. With their own pastry and bakery, they bake their own breads twice daily.

Today, Wagshal's has over 100 employees, but it is rooted in personalized service, something the Fuchs family has ingrained in their staff, who themselves are treated like members of the family. They recognize employees with birthday parties, provide medical and retirement programs and view everyone as a part of the team.

As employee Pam Ginsberg, who appears in a video as "Pam The Butcher", relates, "This is not our job over here, it is our lives."

Much of the Wagshal's product and service line is portrayed on the company website, [www.wagshals.com](http://www.wagshals.com), a remarkable location that even includes a 42-page click-and-open book about the history and philosophy of the business.

Aaron Fuchs, who once ran the market and deli, is now company vice president of imports and national distribution. His brother, Brian, who oversaw the delicatessen, is vice president of operations.

### Capital ideas

But there is much more to this success story. Prime meats, fresh seafood, pork from Iowa, Shenandoah Valley poultry, milk-fed veal, beef from nearby Pennsylvania and Virginia farms, exotic meats like elk and antelope, are all part of the offerings, complemented by hard-to-find cheeses, artisan breads, craft beers and specialty wines.



Wagshal's imports pork bellies and other raw cuts from the Fermin family.

Most enterprises reaching such heights would want to rest on their laurels with such a reputation and following, but not this company. For the past several years, the family-owned firm has hosted the DC Master Grill Series, bringing in celebrity grill masters several days a week in the mall parking lot. For a fee, customers can interface with the famous grillers, sample their finest offerings, ask them questions and know they are helping a local charity. The list of charities is almost endless and includes hospitals and schools, the DC Central Kitchen, child development centers, and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

In 2011, the firm opened a school lunch division, serving from 30 to 500 meals a day for the vast number of charter schools in the area.

“Many of these charter schools do not have their own cafeterias,” Aaron says, “and parents take turns buying meals for all the children in the schools. We offer comfort foods ranging from meatloaf to fajitas and fried chicken to pasta dishes. Off-site delivery and catering is one of our strong suits and we even provide food service for the NBC Channel 4 television studios in the city.”

Special events are prime marketing opportunities for Wagshal’s, as well. They will market about 1,800 turkey dinners with all the trimmings at Thanksgiving, a task so large that they have to bring in a tractor-trailer loaded with the birds to deal with the logistics. Another novel event they host is a Sweet Treat Tea Party for kids.

Super Bowl Party hosts see Wagshal’s party trays and platters designed on a level that rivals anything entered in international competition.

There appears to be nothing Wagshal’s feels it can’t put together for its customers, be it New Orleans-style beignets or St. Louis ribs.

All of the firm’s locations are within one mile of each other, a space populated by 40,000 folks who turn to the company for what The Washington Post calls “The Best of the Best.”

In May 2013, the firm opened an indoor-outdoor restaurant (seating 50 inside and 40 outside). It was designed with a rural Spanish theme that features the excitement of Spain’s “mercados” or open markets. Where else in any city would you find 74 feet of pastries on display, a pickle bar and gelato counter, fresh cut flowers and an Old World charcuterie where sausages or prime bone-in filets cut to order are handed to you by the butcher?

“We exceeded our expectations with the restaurant concept,” Aaron confides. “Now we are thinking about opening a back-alley location that would be a smoked and cured take-out meats counter. The demand for items like ribs, chicken and barbecue items is high and we think in terms of an alley location as a hidden-from-view eatery with a mystique driven by the fact that it is off the beaten path.”

### **Satisfying constituents**

With the marketing acumen that the Fuchs family has so successfully demonstrated, the enterprise has not deviated from its base. Wagshal's still serves up 400 lbs. of its signature prime smoked-brisket sandwiches at each of its locations weekly. Doing it the right way for the company means following a 50-day aging and curing process for this product. Bill Fuchs' inspiration came from his travels to Montreal to get ideas on creating a facility that reflects the French style of that city, where this top-shelf item can be served with even more flair.

"While we do purchase some boxed meats, we always try to purchase carcass meats whenever we can," Aaron relates. "In fact, we try to make everything we can from scratch, be it cutting cabbage for our coleslaws or smoking and curing our own meats.

Yet, even with the home-kitchen concept in mind, Wagshal's just can't help showing off and has begun importing pork bellies and other raw cuts from the Fermin family, located in a rural region of Spain, for a smoked bacon specialty product. That complements the Ibérico de Bellota, those high-end, slow-aged pork delicacies found at its locations. They also have bacon-topped glazed donuts and fresh oysters from Chesapeake Bay.

Wagshal's has won so many awards from groups like the National Restaurant Association and *Food & Beverage Magazine* for its innovations that any serious student of or craftsman in the meat industry owes it to themselves to see this operation. But one might have to wait in line behind the politicians and local chefs who consistently make this institution their special place to shop.