

EATER

Pam 'The Butcher' Ginsberg Considers Customers Family

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Welcome back to [Lifers](http://dc.eater.com/tags/lifers) [<http://dc.eater.com/tags/lifers>](http://dc.eater.com/tags/lifers) , a feature in which Eater interviews the men and women who have worked in the restaurant and bar industry for the better part of their lives, sharing their stories and more.



Pam "The Butcher" Ginsberg [Photo: [R. Lopez <http://underabushel.com>](http://underabushel.com)]

A conversation with **Pam "The Butcher" Ginsberg** starts with a stop at the sandwich counter at the original location of **Wagshal's deli**. She's having half a roast beef on rye with a slab of mustard, and I'm having a Reuben, stacked high with thinly sliced corned beef. The sandwiches are one of many of Pam's staples, and they're prepared in the basement of this upper Northwest D.C. market, known for its meat and butcher products.

After Pam fixes my sandwich, we sit outside by the front door to the shop. Really, there are only two things that can stop the conversation. Either it's a bite from her sandwich, or the every-so-often interruption that comes from a passing customer.

"Nice to see you baby." "Hi! How are you?" "See her? That's Mindy, she gets her chicken and salmon here daily," she tells me.

For eight years, Pam has been behind the counter at **Wagshal's**. She considers many of her customers to be family. She says it's the job that God intended her to have. In an interview with Eater, Pam tells us more about her beloved customers, the **daily grind** of a butcher shop, and how she was able **to find love** at the deli.



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So you grew up doing this?

This is all I've ever done. I'm 51-years-old now. I've done a lot in the food business, all over town. I've worked in kitchens, I did catering, and I've worked inside Eastern Market. I also worked at Brookfield supermarkets more than once. Now, I've been here for about eight years, and this is like my big payoff for all my hard work in my life. I'm one of the few people who's doing exactly what God meant for her to be doing. Seriously. As crazy as it sounds, that's who I am.

This is exactly what you want to do?

This is not my job. It's my life, and my whole life.

Do you remember day one when you first got here?

Absolutely. The owner, Bill [Fuchs] was looking for someone to take over the market. They hired me, and I came in and got myself comfortable very quick. My real name is Pamela Ginsberg, but I became Pam "The Butcher." I came to a group of people with as much passions as I had ... This job is about treating people the way they want to be treated. That's what's so really special about Wagshal's.

Why do they call you Pam "the butcher"?

I was actually named by a little girl, years ago. Her name is Abigail. I think she was from Cleveland Park. Anyways, she took a slip and fall in the deli, and when we went to help her, she said, "I'm okay Pam the butcher!" And, ever since then the name has just stuck. People started calling me that. That was probably five years ago.

A lot has changed in Washington, DC in recent years. There are a lot of good markets and some new butcher shops now.**How do you keep your edge?**

We do something nobody else does. God love them, and I like many of the other places —places like Red Apron Butchery. But, they're all doing sandwiches and charcuterie. This is a tough business. You really got to know what you're doing with that animal. There's no such thing as waste here. You have to understand the meat.

The best difference between me and everyone else, when I'm looking at a hindquarter, I understand what I can do to it. I break it down to a different level, and I have a God's gift for what I do. You know, we're not as big as Whole Foods, but we treat our market like a newborn child ... And, it's the reason why we're still so successful. People here are never disappointed, or should I say rarely disappointed. You can't make people happy all the time. I mean a New York strip or rib eye is \$30 a pound in my case, but never once can you go someplace else and put it next to ours and say it's better. We have relationships with these farmers, with these vendors. The guy Bill Fuchs is buying hanging beef from the same guy my father bought. I mean my father died in 1978. That's a long time.

What's an average day look like for you? Is there ever such a thing as an average day?

An average day? I would wish for an average day. Usually I'm here for about 12 hours. The hours vary, and I'm still available when I'm at home. This is something that I've done my whole life, and I'm not complaining. There are always emails and calls to be made.

Sometimes you have to step outside of the 1,100 square feet here.

So your customers are more like friends than they are like strangers.

Yeah, I mean, you know, you build a relationship. I've had people who have followed me for 30 years. I go the extra mile to make sure they get the most bang for their buck. You don't spend \$30 to have a bad meal. And, you know Bill is everything I've ever wanted in my own business. This is the experience. You come here to have something special.

What's the one mistake people make when they come here?

Well, they look at the prices, and they get shocked. But, once you explain to them the difference, you can see beyond it. A Whole Foods lamb is not as expensive, but it comes from Australia or New Zealand, so number one it's frozen. Number two, our lambs are local; I know where they came from. You know what they're fed and how they were treated. There are a whole lot of factors involved. Our seafood is given away, not saved. We buy the freshest product available. We make all of our sausages by hand. We smoke all of our own meats. The turkey breast at our sandwich counter, it's made here in the basement.

How many people work for you?

Not that many. There's 10 of us. And, for instance, our guys Edwin and Jose, they were the cleaners in our market, and I saw their potential... You're only as good as what you've got with you. I couldn't get it done without them. Jenny our head cashier, you should see her filet a rack of lamb... I hire the people who are right for the job. What one person does, including the dishwasher, is just as important as what I do. I have not asked anyone to do something that I've not done. And, man do you need it come Thanksgiving. You have 1,600 turkeys, and you have only 10 people to wash, clean and dry them. Then, there's the seasoning and cooking. The holidays always make me cry, because I'm like, "Wow did we really just do that? Did we really handle all those orders?" That's where the passion comes through. It's no joke. I'm doing exactly what I was meant to be doing.

What's the most fun about this job, since it's about the passion?

Seeing people satisfied and coming back for more. It's the little things. A customer brought me a framed picture a few weeks ago from their cookout. It's a picture of me with their pork belly. And, this Tiffany's bracelet that I've been wearing, it's from a customer that gave it to me years ago. You know, people have relationships with their doctors, it's the same thing. I've been to bar mitzvahs, weddings, baptisms. I mean these are my customers. They're like family. And, it really does take a certain personality. You need patience because some customers can be crazy. You have to step back and assume some people can't be satisfied. At the same time, I don't have any patience, especially when it comes to my staff sometimes.

Do you always want to be behind the meat counter?

There are days when I'm like, "Can I just cut meat please?" Now there

are computers and calls and schedules to keep, but that's the evolution of this job. But, how did I learn? I watched my father. I started doing this when I was 14 years-old. I basically came this way.

Tell me more about your family and personal life? Do you have family or kids?

I have a partner. My partner is the sous-chef here. It's kind of like we're married already.

What's that like working with your partner? Do you keep a safe distance?

Not really. Sometimes she can finish my thoughts, and she relates well to the struggles. It actually works out pretty well. She started working here when she was 17 years-old and actually grew-up across the street. Years later, she started working here again, and we met. We've been together for six years now. She worked in the kitchen, and we were out front one night before closing, and one of the other guys was like, "She's hitting on you." I just had a bad break-up and didn't believe it. But, we've been together since. I guess we are lifers. I met love here. And, this is the one I've been waiting for my whole life, both the job and the love. It can happen. It really can. I'm living proof that this can happen.

—*Tim Ebner*

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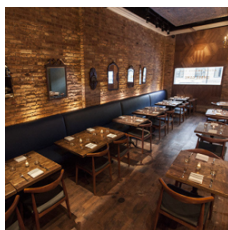
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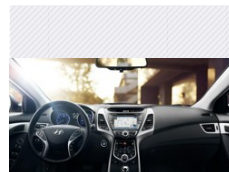
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YAHOO!



There's only ONE Pam in this universe, like the saying goes: The mold was broken when she was created. In today's world, it's nice to know, there are still a few places where you can find people that love what they do and tell you the truth. We love you, Pam .

Trudi and Jerry