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## Sandwiches: Wagshal's brisket is a cut above

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People who think there are no great delicatessens left in Washington need only drop by [Wagshal's](#) in Spring Valley for a reassuring helping of reality. The most recent arrival to its sandwich menu just might restore their faith.

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When Bill Fuchs bought the deli from Ben Wagshal in 1990, he worried about messing with a family business that had been operating for more than 60 years.

"Some of the customers had been coming here for three and four generations and wanted things to stay as they were," said Fuchs, 60. He gained their trust by innovating in ways that sandwich enthusiasts in particular noticed and appreciated. The smoked brisket is a prime example: literally, because Fuchs uses only USDA prime beef for it and for his house-made corned and roast beef. The sandwich is nothing more than meat, bread and mustard, but the beef alone is so packed with intense, complex flavor that the result is one of the best sandwiches I've tasted recently.

Fuchs, a trained butcher, formulated his brisket recipe to approximate Montreal smoked meat, which he discovered while living in Canada in the 1970s. The specialty, popularized by [Lester's Delicatessen](#) and [Schwartz's](#), derives from a secret recipe that, as Fuchs puts it, combines the best elements of corned beef and pastrami. Fuchs's goal was to duplicate it.

Instead, I think he surpassed it. As well he should have, because his process takes almost seven weeks, start to finish. At the end of it, a 23-pound brisket yields five pounds of usable meat.

Here's how Fuchs does it. He starts with a whole brisket, including the fatter (and more flavorful) deckle end; dry-ages it for four weeks; then vacuum seals it with curing salt, spices and red wine to cure it for 17 days. Once the brisket is rinsed clean of curing salt and rubbed with a secret blend of 16 spices (including black peppercorn, coriander, mustard seed and dill seed), it's ready for the smoker.

But not just any smoker. Fuchs retrofitted a Chinese duck smoker in a way that allows him to closely monitor and control the internal temperature of the box and the amount of smoke released into it. He uses different kinds of wood depending on what he is smoking: apple wood for salmon, a blend for turkey breast, hickory for beef. After it smokes for 12 or so hours, the brisket is still not quite done: It has to spend two days resting, tightly wrapped in plastic.

It took a lot of trial and effort for Fuchs get the product where he wants it, and even more to figure out the best way to show it off.

"The meat has to be hot," he insists. "Steaming is optimal, but we realize people can't do that at home." At the deli, the meat is sliced and steamed to order; for take-away, it's packaged in 8-ounce boil-in bags (\$8.50). Microwaving is not recommended.

Fuchs maintains that his product is better than the original he modeled it after. To demonstrate the point, he cut into one of his briskets and placed it next to one he got from Schwartz's in Montreal.

"You can see Schwartz's is a wet cure. It has a lighter color, and there's not much crust on it," he said, pointing to the wan specimen he was describing. Then he hoisted the Wagshal's brisket onto a slicer, moved the arm back and forth a few times and proudly displayed the output in the palm of his hand.

The differences were obvious. The competition was the color of a Band-Aid; Fuchs's brisket was a deep adobe hue with plenty of prime meat marbling and a distinctive crust.

"Can I make you a sandwich?" Fuchs asked.

Was he kidding?

*The brisket-on-rye sandwich is \$7 at Wagshal's Delicatessen, 4855 Massachusetts Ave. NW (between 48th and 49th streets), 202-363-5698, <http://wagshals.com>.*



Bill Fuchs's brisket sandwich at Wagshal's is the product of almost seven weeks of processing. (James M. Thresher For The Washington Post)



Bill Fuchs piles his house-made brisket onto bread. Mustard will be the finishing touch. (James M. Thresher For The Washington Post)