

Small butcher a dying breed

Lara Becker

As supermarkets garner the meat market, old-style stores are closing.

BY LARA BECKER, STAFF WRITER

Günter Schwahn speaks in pounds, in record numbers of calves skinned and casings cleaned. He can make 4,000 hamburger patties in a week and de-bone a deer by hand in an hour and 15 minutes flat.

The 64-year-old German immigrant isn't squeamish. He's proud. He boasts in one breath of his golf score, and his method of slicing away bone from meat, all the while nimbly whittling away at the pork under his small, strong hands. He doesn't look down.

Like Schwahn himself, a man with a bulldog grip on the American dream, European values and a handmade carving knife, his shop is one of a kind.

Swan's Meat Market at 231 Parsells Ave. is also one of the last of its kind, as chain supermarkets eclipse mom-and-pop businesses, and consumers demand higher food safety standards.

"It is a part of American history, but it's a tradition that's passing on," says Jeremy Russell, spokesman for the National Meat Association.

According to Meat & Poultry magazine, the top 10 supermarket chains are now set to control half the nation's grocery store sales, compared with 30 percent five years ago.

But the trend is not so clear in Monroe County.

In fact, the number of meat and fish market establishments went up slightly, from 24 in 1995 to 27 in 1996, according to the latest data available from the state Department of Economics.

But individual, family-owned butcher shops - the kind where meat is processed in a back room by knowing hands, the kind that define neighborhoods - seem vulnerable in Rochester.

Two meat markets on Joseph Avenue, once anchors on the commercial strip, recently went out of business or moved: Schmidt's Market closed its doors in April 1998. Zimmerman's Sausage relocated to Irondequoit four years before that.

Others nearby, like Gsell-meier's Sausage Market at 860 N. Clinton Ave. and 983 Bay St., were sold and closed before the owner, Ludwig Gsellmeier, died in 1993. He owned a chain of nine stores in Rochester and at one time, employed Schwahn.

There are exceptions. Some of the well-known include Hartmann's Old World Sausage Shop Inc., 1256 N. Clinton Ave.; Inclema's Meat Market, 1337 N. Goodman St.; and Balsam Food Market, 288 N. Winton Road.

"There's not too many left," says Mark Russell, Balsam's owner. "It's kind of a dying breed."

Swan's faces a different, albeit immediate, threat: No one aims to push it out but no one wants to take it over either. The business could close any day.

Schwahn's daughter, 33-year-old Anita Roesner, has worked in her father's store since it opened in 1970. She was pushing up her sleeves to mix meat with bare hands when most girls her age would have squirmed at the prospect. The smell of the smokehouse lingers in her memory and on her clothes.

But this isn't her dream. She'd rather be a full-time mother to her sons, 8-year-old Stephen, 5-year-old Alex, and a daughter on the way. Her brother, Thomas Schwahn, has never been interested in the trade.

So the shop in northeast Rochester, with its knickknacks and beer steins and photographs of Schwahn's proudest moments, could go the way of the others.

"I'll be very sad if it goes," says 52-year-old Pete Despard, a technician at Eastman Kodak Co. for 30 years, who's eaten lunch at Swan's for the last five. "There's no one else in town that fills this niche."

Business hasn't been booming lately, though over the years, Schwahn tapped a well of success. He owns property, and vacations in places like Hawaii and South Africa.

But those are hobbies. Making sausage is a passion - his first love, Schwahn says, second only to golf.

He's also dedicated to his children and their children, to travel and darts. He once nailed five bull's eyes in a row.

Precision for Schwahn is a constant. He measures just so much nutmeg, cloves, margarine and salt into his breakfast sausage. He twists his pork links at even intervals. His shop stays orderly, despite the obvious hazards. Neat as a pin: wie ein gepelltes Ei.

The store is open Thursday through Saturday. The rest of the week, Schwahn selects, chops, grinds, smokes, cooks and occasionally massages meat.

These are motions he learned as a 15-year-old apprentice in Heidelberg, Germany.

Schwahn holds no degree in anatomy, but he has a certain knowledge about four-legged bodies - how hearts pump and shoulders connect and intestines curve.

It comes naturally to him, like paying with cash ("I never had a car payment in my whole life," he says) and shooting par.

He'd like to pass all of this down. In some ways, he has. His daughter still speaks German, a habit formed when every word she uttered in English cost her a penny. She still responds to her pet name, schatzi. Sweetheart. And her youngest son is comfortable among the hanging sausages and buckets of cut-away fat.

"You have to come from a strong family," Schwahn says. "If the little one was 13 or 14 now, I would wait for him."

But Schwahn wants to retire soon. For half a minute, he stops moving and considers. Does it break his heart a little to let go of his shop, his tangible dream?

Yes, he says quickly. "But I've worked hard all my life. Now it's time to enjoy it."

He'll be OK, says Erna Schwahn, his sister-in-law. She's worked at Swan's since 1973.

She wipes her hands after serving the last of the meager lunch crowd. There's a saying, she says: "Er fällt immer auf den Füßen."

He always lands on his feet.

