

# D & L Meats offers the custom cuts customers want

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UNION BRIDGE, MD — It's the only place you can go to get a "Charlie King Roast." D & L Meats in Union Bridge, Md., is the only meat business around that sells the special order, "secret recipe" bottom round roast.

Alice Topper, of nearby Westminster, picked up two 13-pound Charlie King Roasts for Easter. "You've got to go to Union Bridge for that," she said. She planned to cook the boneless, no-waste cuts on a spit and serve them up with barbecue sauce to feed her 34 guests for Easter dinner.

The roast came to be known as the "Charlie King Roast" when King first ordered it, and others subsequently went to D & L asking for it by name. Orders for the roast are even recorded on sales slips as "Charlie King Roast."

Don Cunfer, master butcher, and his wife, Linda, established D & L Meats in the fall of 1978. "We really do try to accommodate people," said Mrs. Cunfer of their retail and custom order business.

Based in a white block building which was once a dairy, D & L Meats is located on George Street in Union Bridge, just several feet from the railroad bridge that crosses the cool, rolling waters of Little Pipe Creek. "We heard about this place," said Linda Cunfer of the location, when it was known as Union Bridge Locker Plant. She said they were "faced with having to rebuild the business. The Yinglings had built up a good reputation," she explained. Yingling's was in business until the early 1970's. "We still use the same cure and processing that they (Yingling's) used," she added.

Don Cunfer, with 40 years of experience, said he "never went to school" to learn butchering skills. "He's been in the meat business since he was 11," said his wife, "in one phase or another." The master butcher said he started in Drums, Pa., "in the old country slaughterhouse. I had a choice of farm or the slaughterhouse. Cunfer chose the latter. He said "that was when farm work was all done by hand, and that was not my cup of tea."

D & L Meats has steadily built up

their clientele by offering only quality products, dealing with customers honestly and staying with old, time-tested recipes and processing techniques. Cunfer said the most important aspect of the business for his customers "is knowing that the animal that they brought in is the animal they get back. Your animal will not run with anyone else's."

He said he uses a name and number system, with every piece of meat hand tagged. Meat at D & L is "not switched or snitched," he said. "I have a conscience that I go to bed with every evening. I'm a Pennsylvania German Dutchman, and that's the way I was raised, and that's the way I'm going to die."

The operation is inspected by the USDA one to three times per week. The 12 or more rooms of the plant, from cattle pens outside, to the kill floor, to the retail area, are sanitized daily. Cunfer said, "There is a lot of time spent on cleaning and maintenance. It's costly." He said he uses 1,200 to 1,600 pounds of disinfectant cleaner every year.

A chilly tour of the plant revealed a labyrinth of specially equipped and temperature controlled rooms. The cure box is kept at a constant temperature of 40°F. In the busy season, from Nov. 1 to the end of January or mid-February, it contains as many as 10 to 15 stainless steel and fiberglass tanks that each hold one ton of meat — 70 to 90 hams per tank.

Perhaps best known for these hickory and apple smoked hams, Cunfer said they are first cured in a low-salt brine for two weeks. Then, they are transferred to the 30-year old smokehouses where they hang on racks over actual hickory and apple logs for three to four weeks.

D & L adds no water or preservatives to the hams, and uses real logs rather than liquid smoke, sawdust or wood chips. Linda Cunfer said that the slow process is unlike commercial enterprises that "cure today and smoke tomorrow."

The warmth and aroma of the smokehouses invite one peek inside. Like great vaults, the houses

hold an average of one ton of hams and bacon. The meat hangs on a rotator and is heated with propane to bring it up to temperature, as required by the USDA.

"We still have to crawl down to the bottom and build a fire," added Cunfer. "It's a process of smoke and heat, smoke and heat." The aromatic hams and bacons are specially seasoned with a custom blend of spices. "It really is a secret recipe," said Cunfer. The couple even provides an instruction sheet which spells out "Care for Hickory and Apple Smoked Pork."

The butcher said cleaning the smokehouses takes a day and a half. "It's like cleaning giant ovens."

Sides of beef are hung in the chill box which is kept at between 32 and 33°F. With the keen eye of a butcher, Cunfer pointed out differences in the suspended beef and dairy carcasses. He explained, "If filled out properly, you can't tell the difference."

From the chill box, sides of beef are cut into quarters and then stored in the beef quarter box. Meat is then sliced to customers' specifications in the processing room. Four to five employees work year around, and an additional two or three part timers are employed in the busy winter season.

Depending upon the day and orders to be filled, Richard Frock may be manning the saw, while Danny Billington stuffs hams from the smokehouses into stockinets, and Pat Hahn may be carefully wrapping and stamping each cut of meat with the date, customer's number and name, in preparation for the freezer.

Like a quick visit to the Arctic Circle, Cunfer said the large walk-in freezer is kept at minus 20°F., and with the fans blowing, that's a wind chill factor of minus 30°F., he said.

The meat is "flash frozen" at that temperature. The freezer can accommodate more than 27 meat carts with each cart carrying seven to nine trays of meat. Sometimes the frost on the outside of the freezer gets so thick that Cunfer said he has to scrape it off.

The perimeter of the 20-by-40 ham drying room is lined with many three-tiered racks full of smoked hams, bacons and shoulders during the busy season. In the winter, that room is naturally refrigerated.

In an adjoining area, rows of meaty ham hocks hang from racks like miniature hams. The plump delicacies are a popular item with D & L customers. Smoked turkeys and chickens are also stored in that area.

"People aren't eating red meat like they used to," said Linda Cunfer, "so we are trying to offer more poultry and pork."

Customers come from all areas of Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia to "bring us their meat to cure and smoke," said Cunfer. "They do travel a distance to get our smoked meats. People are looking for good smoked meats with no preservatives or water added, and they can't find them," he said.

On Good Friday one patron travelled from Leesburg, Va. to purchase six pounds of D & L's old-fashioned chipped beef. Cunfer said the process takes 10 to 13 weeks. He pointed to the meat standing in a great tub full of its own juices.

Other products offered in the retail area of the operation include D & L's own Football Ham, so dubbed because of its football shape. It is their lean, tasty version of a "deli ham." Scrapple, puddin', bacon, old fashioned sausage bladders, and much more, fill the meat cases in the store. Cunfer said that he sells an average of 300 hams, not including custom or-



Master butcher Don Cunfer inspects carcasses in the chill box of D & L Meats.

ders, during the Christmas season.

The storefront serves as an office as well, where Linda Cunfer will go step by step through the order blanks to help customers deliberate thicknesses, weights, and quantities needed for custom orders of meat. The bulletin board holds news clips of their customers who make the headlines, like Mel Goble, who has his exotic Highlanders butchered there. Pig figurines dot the shelves and a pig pinata hangs over the deli case. Her collection of "pigmania" in the office extends to the kitchen of their New Windsor, Md. home, with pig cookie jars and sun-catchers. She even officially stamps each purchase with "Hog Happy."

What does a master butcher eat at home? His wife said that one of

his favorite meals is chuck roast in the crock pot, or barbecued spare ribs. For Easter, she served a ham and leg of lamb with a jacket.

The Cufers emphasized that their main interests are in meeting the needs of their customers, cutting to their specifications and accommodating special orders (like the Charlie King Roast).

D & L Meats is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday, until 6 p.m. Friday, and until 4 p.m. on Saturday. Linda Cunfer added, "We're one of the few businesses around that still takes a siesta." They close the door and turn out the lights from noon until 1 p.m. every day for lunch. "It's the only way we get to eat lunch," she said. Numbers to call are (301) 775-2611 and (301) 876-7745.



Don and Linda Cunfer, owners of D & L Meats, stand behind the meat display case in their Union Bridge market.



Linda Cunfer weighs out a pound of D & L's own "football ham."