

Columnists - opinion

Borsellino: Bringing home the bacon with prosciutto plant

By [ROB BORSELLINO](#)
REGISTER COLUMNIST
January 17, 2005

Herb Eckhouse is one of the first folks I met when I moved to Des Moines. I was impressed with the guy:

Harvard graduate, Pioneer executive who ran operations in Russia, France, Italy and Japan. A world traveler who has walked the streets of Bangalore, and cruised the canals of Venice.

He's a family man - married 25 years and the father of three extremely gifted children.

He's one of those guys whose input I seek. I value his insights and respect his opinions.

Then, about a year ago, we were talking and Herb mentioned that he was going to build a factory in Norwalk and manufacture prosciutto.

My first reaction was to get in his face and say: "Hey, goomba, where I come from it's not 'pro-shoo toe.' It's 'pro-zhoot.' So get it right."

My next reaction was to say: "A prosciutto factory in rural Iowa? What the hell are you talking about?"

Then there was the whole thing about this Jewish guy from Des Moines selling pork to Italian chefs and shopkeepers in New York and Jersey, Chicago and Vegas.

But I didn't even go there. I just figured I'd back off and wait until Herb came to his senses, realized this was crazy and found work as a consultant.

That was a year ago.

Thursday I was walking the halls of La Quercia, the 9,900-square-foot prosciutto factory on a hill at the south edge of Norwalk. So how did this happen?

This goes back to the years when Herb worked in Italy for Pioneer. He lived in Parma, a place where prosciutto is a \$2 billion-a-year business. He loved the stuff. When he moved back to Iowa he got to thinking: "We produce all these commodities like corn, beans and pork and then we ship it out. Why not keep it here?"

He left Pioneer in 2000 and has spent the past four years fantasizing about owning a prosciutto factory.

Now he's ready. The grand opening is a week from today and Herb has invited everyone who has touched his life - from Lt. Gov. Sally Pederson to Rabbi David Kaufman.

Pederson said she'll be there.

Herb's looking to produce a few hundred thousand pounds of prosciutto a year - using Iowa pork.

And he'll have about seven employees - a labor boom in Norwalk, a town of about 7,000.

That got me wondering about how this deal is playing out with the locals.

I went downtown to Rudy's Bar and Grill on Main Street and talked to Bob Ross, the bartender. I asked how much he was hearing about the factory, are folks excited, what's the buzz at the bar?

Blank stare.

Then he remembered.

"Oh, you mean that place where they're going to make sausage or ham or something? Don't hear much, but it's a new business and that's good."

Some folks at the bar heard that and said it'll be good to have Norwalk famous for something besides baton twirlers. I didn't get it.

While they were explaining, Marty Bussanmas came in and grabbed a table for lunch. He's a trucker from Norwalk. I asked about the factory and I asked Marty if he'd ever eaten prosciutto.

"I think I have, but I won't swear to it."

Pause.

"No wait, that was portobello. That's not meat. I don't know that I've ever had that stuff."

But he'll try anything if it shows up on Rudy's menu.

Across the street and down the block I found the Norwalk Hardware Store. It was empty but the owner waved me in to his back office.

I walked in and the place smelled like my Aunt Millie's apartment on a Sunday - meatballs, heavy on the garlic. On the desk was a bag with prosciutto, salami, copacolla and some cheeses.

I'm wondering if this is some kind of setup, but it turns out this guy is Domonick Cimino and he grew up on the south side of Des Moines. He just got back from Graziano's and he's having lunch.

Nobody has to tell Cimino the difference between portobello and prosciutto.

He laughs and says: "I'm just hoping I can get some free samples."

Then he gets serious.

"We need business in this town and I'm excited about having this place here."

But he's not as excited as Herb Eckhouse - a Harvard grad, a world traveler, a family man, a corporate executive, a man who will be remembered as that guy who opened the prosciutto factory in Iowa.