

DINING | HOLIDAY MEATS

Old World Butchers, Preserving Traditions

At Christmas, meat shops find turkey takes a back seat to ham, prime rib and kielbasa.

By TAMMY LA GORCE

Like a lot of Italian-Americans, David Perrotti enjoys the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve. But for Mr. Perrotti, 66, of Martinsville, the annual seafood extravaganza is not just a way to preserve tradition. It is also a night off from worrying about the centerpiece of a holiday dinner. Scores of dinners, actually.

"My wife does the Christmas Eve fishes," Mr. Perrotti said recently from behind the long counter of Perrotti's Quality Meats, the butcher shop he and his brother, Mario, have co-owned in Cranford since 1967. It is Christmas dinner — not the one in his own household, but those being cooked in his customers' kitchens — that he spends the run-up to Dec. 25 fretting over.

"People need to know how to prepare what they're having. I always give them directions, what temperature the oven needs to be, what seasonings, whether it's a prime rib or lamb or whatever. They count on us for that," he said.

The holiday season at Perrotti's Quality Meats, as at other specialty butcher shops across New Jersey, is a frantic, if festive, time of year. Like trusted bakeries with deep European roots that churn out traditional holiday sweets — German stollen, Italian panettone — butchers, too, attract the nostalgic and tradition-minded throughout December.

Italian butchers, like Mr. Perrotti and Angelo Esposito, co-owner of Esposito's Meats and Deli in East Hanover, field a variety of requests for Christmas dinner meats because "there's nothing traditional that you have to have as far as a meat dish on Christmas Day," said Mr. Esposito, 56, of East Hanover.

But both Mr. Perrotti and Mr. Esposito, whose father started the business in Newark in 1957 and who now owns Esposito's with his brothers, Edward and Michael Esposito, said Christmas dinner was too important for lechero fish. "Sometimes we'll see grandmothers and granddaughters coming in together" to shop for a special main course, Mr. Esposito said.

At Perrotti's, fresh ham (uncured and uncooked, \$3.99 a pound, boned and prepped with Italian seasonings) and prime rib (\$8.49 a pound with bone, \$8.99 without) are among the most popular choices, Mr. Perrotti said. At Esposito's, stuffed pork roasts (\$4.99 a pound) are a top seller. "We bone it out, open it like a butterfly, season it with salt and pepper and garlic and parsley, add pecorino cheese and prosciutto, and tie it back together," Mr. Esposito said.

Both Mr. Perrotti and Mr. Esposito have baccalà, or dried salt cod, a staple of the Feast of the Seven Fishes, on hand at Christmastime. And Mr. Esposito further eases the holiday crunch for his Italian customers by selling a prepared codfish salad and a mixed seafood salad for the Christmas Eve feast.

At Janek's Fine Foods in Passaic, a Polish butcher shop, as the holidays approach, "people come here and say, 'My grandmother used to make this,' or 'I remember having this with my mom and dad,'" said James Janisheski, co-owner with his wife, Rose. Mr. Janisheski estimated that he sold 500 or 600 hams at Christmastime (prices range from \$2.29 a pound with bone to \$5.89 a pound for a ham that is glazed, sliced and hand-smoked on site), because "Christmas is a big ham holiday



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL PERROTTI/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Spending weeks fretting over scores of customers' holiday dinners.

among Europeans," he said.

"But what people come from all over the place for at Christmas is kielbasa," said Mr. Janisheski. One day in November at Janek's, Mrs. Janisheski demonstrated the meat's popularity by pointing toward the ceiling, where a row of the sausages was hanging. "You see these?" she asked. "At Christmas they're hung throughout the entire store."

Mr. Janisheski, 55, of Carlstadt, smokes and double-smokes sausages, which range in price from \$4.89 to \$6.89 a pound, in a smokehouse behind the premises that he fills with up to 600 pounds of meat before the holidays. He will smoke turkeys, but not many of his Eastern European regulars order them, he said.

"There's some Old World superstition about, you have to eat pork at Christmas, not poultry, so your luck won't fly away," said Mr. Janisheski, who has been working at Janek's, founded by his grandfather in Mahwah in 1924, since 1990. The shop has been in Passaic for more than 65 years, Mrs. Janisheski said.

Christianne Struble, co-owner with her husband, Steven Struble, of the Swiss Pork



Store in Fair Lawn, also sees little demand for turkey at Christmas among her regular customers with Swiss, Polish and German roots.

"A big thing on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day for them," said Mrs. Struble, 54, "is European cold cuts and sausages," like weisswurst, a mild veal sausage with spices (\$6.29 a pound). "They like to have a big spread, so we do a variety, like different kinds of liverwurst, beef salami and kielbasa. Everything is homemade," she said. Ham is also popular at the holidays, and the shop has a smokehouse on the premises where it smokes its own, she said.

At the Hungarian Meat Center in Passaic, the holiday specialty is hurka, a liverwurst and rice sausage, said Andrew Rozsa, the store owner. Mr. Rozsa, 26, of Gar-

field, ships packages of hurka (\$5 a pound) throughout the United States during the holiday season. He estimated that he went through roughly 1,000 pounds this time of year. "People want it because it's homemade, using the spices and flavors they remember," he said.

The same nostalgic appeal brings regulars to the Farm View Pork Store in Pompton Lakes every year for fresh country-style breakfast bratwurst (\$7.99 a pound) and kielbasa sausage rings with garlic (\$6.99 a pound), according to the owner, Robert Benkendorf, 54, of Vernon.

"At Christmastime I'll sell four or five times the amount that I normally would," said Mr. Benkendorf, who specializes in German sausages and has owned the store since 1987. Like the other butchers, Mr. Benkendorf recommended that customers order their meats up to two weeks ahead of time for the holidays. "German people are very product-loyal. When they find something they like, they stay with it. I know what a lot of my customers are going to do for Christmas dinner year after year."

Supermarket meat departments, he said, hold little appeal for them. "When you have family coming out of the woodwork for one big holiday meal, no one wants to do it halfway," he said. "Here, every single piece of pork goes through my hands."

TASTING NOSTALGIA

The following are among the New Jersey butchers that offer a taste of the Old World. Hours listed below are regular hours; some stores have extended hours before Christmas.

CRANFORD Perrotti's Quality Meats, 23 South Union Avenue; (906) 273-4880. Open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturday, 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Closed Sunday.

EAST HANOVER Esposito's Meats and Deli, 90 Ridgedale Avenue; (973) 884-0151 or espositomeatsanddeli.com. Open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Closed Sunday.

FAIR LAWN The Swiss Pork Store, 24-10 Fair Lawn Avenue; swissporkstoreoffairlawn.com; (201) 797-9779. Open Monday through Friday, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Saturday, 6 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Sunday, 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

PASSAIC The Hungarian Meat Center, 189 Parker Avenue; (973) 473-1645 or kolbass.com. Open Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Sunday.

Janek's Fine Foods, 200 Monroe Street; (973) 778-3147 or janeksfinefoods.com. Open Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Sunday and Monday except for catering.

POMPTON LAKES Farm View Pork Store, 126 Wanague Avenue; (973) 835-1350. Open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Closed Wednesday and Sunday.



Top left, Perrotti's Quality Meats in Cranford, with David Perrotti, right, behind the counter. Center, Rose Janisheski, surrounded by sausages hanging from the ceiling, helped a customer at Janek's Fine Foods in Passaic. Left, James Janisheski, at his smoker.