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Glenn Asakawa | The Denver Post

Steve Polidori and his sister, Melodie Polidori Harris, have taken over their family sausage-making business.

Holding up the tradition

New generation of Polidoris grinds out sausage

By Ellen Sweets
Denver Post Staff Writer

Forget every unappetizing thing you've ever heard about sausage, especially the bits about, well, unappetizing bits.

Members of the Polidori family have been blending ground pork with just the right balance of salt and spices for more than 80 years.

They still take pride in the fact that their product is free of monosodium glutamate, preservatives, filler, gluten, soy, nitrates and artificial coloring: just choice cuts of nicely trimmed pork shoulder and carefully measured seasonings.

Ensclosed in an unpretentious building that includes what was once the carriage house behind the old Coors Mansion in north Denver, Steve Polidori and his sister, Melodie Polidori Harris, are continuing a tradition launched in 1925, when their great-grandfather, Rocco, and his wife, Anna, opened Polidori's Grocery and Meat Market. And it was there that Anna first prepared the sausage recipe she brought with her from Abruzzi, her hometown in Italy.

Anna came through Ellis Island and ended up in Utah, where she met and married Rocco, who was then a miner. After he fell victim to black lung disease they moved to Colorado for fresh air. Rocco's brother owned a grocery

store. In time Rocco and Anna bought the store. She became the butcher. From time to time she would make sausage for her husband and herself.

And what began as a taste of home became a thriving business.

"Customers would come in, smell the sausage cooking and ask for samples," Harris says. "Before long, they were asking to buy it for their homes or their restaurants."

When they could no longer run the store, their sons, Louis and Augie, took over and ran it for almost 40 years. In 1982 Anna died, and in 1988 black lung disease claimed Rocco's life.

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SAUSAGE: Polidoris make links the old-fashioned way

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Until an auto accident in April, Louis Polidori, now 90, visited the plant regularly when not engaged in working with the Colorado History Museum or concentrating on his tai chi classes.

The brother-sister team (the son and daughter of Gary, an attorney, and Ruth Ann Polidori, a retired district court judge) represents the fourth generation to sustain the family business, carrying on in the highly seasoned spirit of their great-grandparents.

Today the Polidori twosome is also the collective brain behind Polidori Meat Processors, the family business that has grown its product line to include chorizo, breakfast sausage, bratwurst and meatballs, in addition to hot and mild Italian sausage.

Housed in buildings cobbled together over the years — a workroom here, an office there, a reception area here — a staff of 13 collaborate to make, pack, market and distribute the modest Polidori line.

Actually the word "modest" is misleading. Polidori sausages are now found in King Soopers stores, Spinelli's Market and throughout the metro area, including Via in Lower



Sausage making is a family affair

Recipes here in Italy bring up some delight. Louis Polidori's restaurant.

The Denver Post's Empire Magazine ran a story on the Polidoris in the mid-1960s.

Downtown; Cucina Colore in Cherry Creek; Carmine's on Penn in the Washington Park neighborhood; Cafe Terracotta in Littleton and all Original Pancake House locations — not to mention Proto's Pizza in the Platte River Valley and Spinelli's Market in Park Hill.

Harris is currently negotiating with Safeway supermarkets to carry the sausages.

Jerry Spinelli says he's used Polidori sausage the past 15 years, and sells roughly 150 pounds of it weekly.

"I grew up on Polidori sausage," he says. "And I was a friend of their grandfather, Louis, when he had the grocery store. When I had my restaurant, I bought all of my meats and my sausage from him."

Spinelli doesn't just buy for local customers. "I have people I send it to in Las Vegas," he says. "I freeze it in one-pound packages and fly it out to them. There are even a couple of people in Aspen who want it. Everybody loves the sausage they grew up on, especially Italians."

However you don't have to be Italian to appreciate Polidori sausage. Alex Kaulbach, one of Terracotta's owners, appreciates the Polidori product as much as their conscientiousness.

"We chose Polidori for a number of reasons, but primarily because they are local and family-owned," Kaulbach says. "From a restaurant standpoint, we like them because the quality of their product is impeccable."

"This is a very people-oriented business and we depend on the reliability of our purveyors to help us best serve customers. Polidori has definitely showed consistence in quality and customer service."

To drive home his point, Kaulbach cites a recent incident.

"I know for a fact that a while back Zing (a

Where to find Polidori sausages

Cafe Terracotta, 5649 S. Curtice St., Littleton, 303-794-6054

Carmine's on Penn, 92 S. Pennsylvania St., 303-777-6443 (Washington Park neighborhood)

Cucina Colore, 3041 E. 3rd Ave., 303-393-6917 (Cherry Creek North)

King Soopers stores

Original Pancake House locations

Proto's Pizza, 2401 15th St. (entrance on Platte Street), 720-855-9400, Boulder, Longmont, Lafayette and Boise

Spinelli's Market, 4621 E. 23rd Ave., 303-329-8143 (Park Hill)

Via, 1801 Wynkoop St., 303-295-1488 (Lower downtown)

— Ellen Sweets

local specialty food distributor) was looking for someone to make a 400-pound special order of sodium-free sausage for Project Angel Heart," he says. "A larger company, a competitor to Polidori, had declined. (Project Angel Heart is a Denver-based organization that provides meals to people living with HIV/AIDS and cancer.)"

"Polidori not only took the order and filled it in less than 48 hours, Mel also discounted it because it was for Project Angel Heart. I love that kind of customer service and attention to the community."

Just as you don't have to be Italian to appreciate spicy sausage, you don't have to be German to appreciate a fat, beer-boiled brat, or Latino to crave a breakfast burrito of chorizo and scrambled egg.

"So many people say they don't like chorizo because of gristle and unappealing body parts, but we use pure meats," says Steve Polidori, who manages the nuts and bolts end of the family operation.

He bought the business from his grandfather and is credited with updating a number of business practices that has led to a 20 percent increase in sales. He also oversees recipe development and proprietary protection for restaurants.

"There aren't many people around anymore who eat the body parts our grandparents ate, so we make a chorizo that is pure pork shoulder. People these days just want what they're used to. I mean, when was the last time you had pickled pig's feet? My grandparents ate them; Me? Not so much."

As he discusses the family business, sausage maker Tim Ryan is feeding sausage into casings, pinching off six-inch sausage links, using only the index, middle and forefingers of his left hand.

"We can make them any length, actually," Ryan says without missing a beat. "You want a 12-inch sausage we can make that. You want a 1-inch one, we can make that, too."

When the batch is finished, it will be sent offsite to be cooked. As the afternoon winds down, Steve and Melodie Polidori relax in their unpretentious offices. Melodie misses her grandfather's presence and says he'll be proud to hear the company won "Best Italian Sausage" for the second year from Andiamo, the Denver-area Italian newspaper.

Louis Polidori still has a desk in an office whose walls are hung with family photographs. A 1925 Atwater Kent radio sits on a shelf behind the desk, and a floor model 1937 Majestic, once known as "the mighty monarch of the air," stands just beyond it.

The red 100-year-old coffee grinder great-grandmother Anna used for grinding spices is there too.

"We keep saying we're going to modernize and get new furniture, but it's like her spirit, hers and Rocco's, are still here as long as we keep their things," Melodie says as she rubs her hand gently over the radio's 4-foot-tall cabinet.

"We even thought about moving at one point, but now that the neighborhood is coming back, we might just stay. I can't help but think they'd like that."

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