

The Salami Maker Who Fought the Law



BEFORE MARC BUZZIO became the best charcuterie-maker in the United States, he was just a boy in his father's shop—fetching coffee, answering the phone, and watching his father, Ugo, turn out old-fashioned Piedmontese and French charcuterie. When Marc was about fourteen, Ugo gave him a soft pine dowel and a length of string and instructed him to tie knots around the dowel without making a dent in the wood. Marc tied the knots as gently as he could. But when his father untied them, he found tiny impressions in the wood—Marc was not yet deft enough to tie the delicate and expensive natural casings Ugo used for his sausages. So Marc kept at it with the string and the dowel until Ugo let him stuff and tie the larger items—fat sopressata coated in black pepper and lengths of saucisson sec. Finally, after

Above: Marc Buzzio holding a type of salami called a vincentino, a Tuscan-style sopressata that has been cured between two marble slabs.

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years of apprenticeship, Ugo allowed Marc to fashion the tiny cacciatorini, the smallest and most difficult of all. “And that,” says Marc, “is when I knew I had made it.”

From the outside, Salumeria Biellese, on 8th Avenue and 29th Street in Manhattan, looks like any other corner deli. There's a lunch counter with steam trays of baked ziti and lasagna. In the morning, a steady stream of hurried customers stops in to order the ubiquitous kaiser roll with egg and cheese. But piled in a cooler, next to bottles of Snapple and cola, are hunks of Berkshire prosciutto, aged a full year. Stacks of salame Biellese and saucisson sec are

still in their string netting. In another cooler, fresh sausages spill out of bowls—hot Italian; chicken, apple, and jalapeño. Salumeria Biellese is the place Thomas Keller and Daniel Boulud call when they need a length of saucisson à l'ail or a hunk of lomo.

Marc Buzio is short and round, with thinning dark hair and a handlebar mustache. His everyday outfit is a white apron with a meat thermometer sticking out of the pocket. He has a brusquely gregarious way about him, talking with his hands and giving a double-cheek kiss to say hello. “Ciao” is how he says goodbye. Above his desk is a sign that reads, in Italian, “There is no medicine for the stupid.” His phone rings off the hook with calls from chefs around New York City. (“I’ll send you down some treats. Ciao.”) He’s like a cartoon of the classic Italian butcher.

Since the early twentieth century, the Buzio family has been making traditional charcuterie and fresh sausages and selling them out of this unassuming storefront. But in the summer of 2002, disaster struck in the form of new United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations for dry aged, ready-to-eat products. The regulations were written with industrial producers in mind, not mom-and-pop operations, and certainly not this beloved neighborhood store where dry-cured sausages have been made in the same careful way for

nearly eighty years. None of that mattered to the USDA, which shut down Salumeria Biellese’s production of cured meats. For the first time in its history, the salumeria sold no salami.

The new USDA regulations require producers to prove their products safe and wholesome by showing that they meet lethality standards for *Listeria monocytogenes* and *E. coli*—meaning that at the time of sale, the process of curing the meat has made it impossible for those bacteria to survive.

At first, such standards sound reasonable enough, but “proof” is a surprisingly subjective term. Making cured sausages the same way your father did, the way others have for hundreds of years, doesn’t constitute proof. Neither does the fact that no one ever gets sick on your product or that you use only heirloom pork and tend to your salamis like some people tend to their children. It isn’t even proof if your product tests negative for bacteria. All the USDA cares about is the process. The traditional method—raw meat transformed into an edible product with nothing but a little salt and a lot of time—makes them very nervous.

So how could Salumeria Biellese prove that their meats were safe? Marc knew that the surefire way to approval was

Below: Raw pork belly will be rubbed with spices and made into pancetta.

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to include a kill step. Cook the product to a certain temperature, irradiate (microwave) it or add preservatives, and the USDA would consider his cured meat safe and wholesome. But for small, traditional producers like Marc who do not want to include a kill step, the situation in 2002 was dire, not to mention confusing. Essentially, they had to come up with a proof that would satisfy the USDA, with very little guidance from the regulators themselves. As Steven Cohen of the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Services (FSIS) put it: "Processors of these products have to define what makes their product safe."

The FSIS did try to help by conducting numerous workshops across the country to show small producers how to adapt to the new regulation. They also now run a small-plant outreach program, where producers can find sources for scientific information. Even so, the USDA strongly recommends that the processor implement one of the three kill steps. This is essentially coercive legislation. Producers don't have to use a kill step, but if they don't, it's not clear how they will prove that their process is safe.

Because most larger, industrialized producers were already using a kill step, it was easy for them to prove that their products met lethality. But Marc refused to give in. "Here's how we make salami," he told me, throwing his hands in the air, his mustache jumping up and down. "Salami 101: Raw meat, salt, hang it to dry. We use no starter cultures, no lactic acid, no preservatives. If we heat our product, all the delicate layers of flavor produced by the long fermentation, the long aging, is lost. If we complied with USDA, we would ruin the product. I'm not Hormel! How could I compete in that market? Why would I want to? Might as well close the doors."

Closing the doors of Salumeria Biellese would have meant breaking the link between a Manhattan street corner and a small town in the Italian Alps. Ugo Buzzio was born in the United States, but his grandmother took him back to Italy as a child, and he grew up with her in the small town of Curino, near Biella, Piedmont. As a teenager and young adult he apprenticed under the village's charcuterie maker, Mario Fiorio. In that part of Italy, there is little division between French and Piedmontese charcuterie; the two countries are separated only by the Alps. So Ugo learned how to make *pâté de campagne*, *peperoni*, *saucisson à l'ail*, *merguez*, *bresaola*, *prosciutto*, *cotto*, *pancetta*, *guanciale*, *mortadella*—anything that could be made with salt, spices, and good, rich meat.

When Ugo moved back to the United States, in the 1930s, he got a job at a charcuterie that had opened five years earlier, and it soon came to be known as Salumeria

Biellese. Many years passed. In 1962 Ugo got a call from the man under whom he had apprenticed in Italy. His eighteen-year-old son, Piero, wanted to come to America—would Ugo give him a job? Piero ended up working with Ugo at Salumeria Biellese for decades, seven days a week, twelve hours a day, making charcuterie exactly the way it had been made in Curino. Now Piero's son-in-law, Paul, works with Marc at the salumeria and little has changed.

Modernization passed Salumeria Biellese by. When artificial casings came on the market, Ugo wasn't interested. When pneumatic sausage stuffers were all the rage, he kept his slower machine. "I'd say, 'What about a clipping machine? What about this or that?'" says Marc. "And Piero would look at me, smack me on the head, and say '*Ma te mosch?*' Which in Piemontese slang means, 'Are you out of your mind?'" Piero calculated figures with a pencil on a white marble slab that he would wipe clean every day. He had one phone with a rotary dial. When Marc took over more of the business, he finally got a computer, which allowed him to spend Saturdays with his family instead of doing the bookkeeping. But the belief that the dry-cured meats should be made the slow, old-fashioned way had been ingrained in him. "There's a benefit to being stubborn," he says. "Had we kowtowed to modernization, we'd be producing a mediocre product."

Salumeria Biellese's aging room gives new meaning to the words "low tech." In a cramped hallway, with workers in white jackets bustling by, Marc yanks open the door to a refrigerated room, revealing about five hundred sausages and *prosciuttos* hanging from the ceiling. There are short and fat ones, tiny, bite-size ones, and some that are two feet long—a dense forest of salami, in a room the size of a small walk-in closet. The ventilation system is a fan hung with rope from the ceiling. A dehumidifier hums in a corner. Despite the low-rent trappings, the drying room is immaculate, every item tied in a neat net of string. The smell makes it clear that something amazing is happening here. This is a smell with a presence, one you could scoop up with a spoon. It is deeply savory and musky sweet. There is nothing sour, or off, about the smell, although it has the low funk of aging meat.

"So," says Marc, "how do we judge the aging process? I rely on my senses. I look, feel, touch, taste. I look at every salami individually as it ages. There's no machine for that. It smells sweet in here, right? It's not a sour smell; it smells good. Guess what, it's drying correctly. If it smells like rotting meat, it's not." Marc picks through the rows of hanging sausages and pork legs. He checks that each one is dry on the outside, not tacky or clammy, and that white, powdery

Lactobacillus coats the outside of each one. Not only does Lactobacillus inhibit harmful bacteria, it's also desirable for its ability to impart flavor, much in the same way that bacteria impart flavor to cheese. "Now here I see a problem," says Marc, from among the hanging salamis. "See this one, how it has a spot of moisture on the outside?" He removes the offender. "I have to wash this off and let it dry before bringing it back in here with the others. A computer wouldn't have caught that. A computer can't tell you about each individual piece."

Next door, in the salumeria's workroom, a half dozen workers chop onions, rosemary, and apples, while others fill casings for fresh sausages. In the hallway, Paul is rubbing pink and white slabs of pork belly with a blend of salt, sugar, and spices for pancetta. Marc decides to make saucisson à l'ail. He throws handfuls of minced garlic and a gallon of good red wine into an enormous standing mixer filled with ground pork. In goes a spice mixture of nutmeg, mace, and white pepper, which puffs up in an aromatic cloud as it combines with the other ingredients. Marc is swift and practiced, stopping to add more wine when the mash looks too dry. Finally, he turns the mixer off and sticks one big hand into the bowl. It emerges with the meat and spice mixture sticking to his fingers like bread dough. He knows it's ready by touch.

"You know what I'd love to do, but I can't?" Marc asks. "Piedmontese donkey salami. *Das*." He chortles. "Here." He hands over a piece of lomo, cured pork loin, thinly sliced and translucent as a petal. It was made from a Four Story Hill Farm pig (Marc gets all his pork from there or from Eden Natural). The flavors in that one bite of lomo unfurl slowly, for what seems like ages—delicately porky and redolent of rosemary.

The term *charcuterie* encompasses any preparation designed with the goal of preserving meat: smoking, curing, confiting, and making pâté are among the most common. Before refrigeration, cooks had to come up with inventive ways to keep their food from spoiling. Some of the methods—such as smoking and curing—are as old as humankind itself. French and Italian style charcuterie (salamis, saucisson, pâté, confit, and the like) are perhaps best known in the United States, but any region with a long history is likely to have some charcuterie tradition. Northern Germany has summer sausage, Switzerland has landjager, and Poland has kielbasa. In fact, for centuries charcuterie was used to feed armies because it keeps well and is lightweight and nourishing.

Dry curing, one of the oldest methods of making charcuterie, is the process of preserving meat or fish in salt and

hanging it to dry. Cooks most likely discovered through trial and error that dry curing prevented food from going bad. They knew it worked because it tasted good, and no one got sick or died from it. Dry-cured sausages like salamis, sopressata, peperoni, cacciatorini, and saucisson sec are made of seasoned, salted ground meat and fat stuffed into a natural casing and hung to dry. Prosciutto, a cured pork leg; pancetta, cured belly; and guanciale, cured pork jowl, are simply raw meat that has been coated in salt and spices and hung to dry.

Dry-cured meat needs to be aged in a carefully controlled environment, much in the same way that sourdough starter and wine need certain conditions to thrive and age properly. Dry curing is a slowly cascading sequence of events which, when done right, eliminates harmful bacteria. Bacteria generally need three things: protein, moisture, and warmth. Some also need oxygen. Take away any one of those elements, and you prevent bacterial growth.

Salt, a natural preservative, makes all of this possible by dehydrating both the meat and the microbes themselves (microbes need moisture to thrive). One of the reasons good prosciutto is so expensive is that the producer essentially takes as a loss the enormous amount of water weight lost in the drying process. Botulism, one of the most dangerous anaerobic bacteria, is prevented from growing by the addition of nitrates, or pink salt, which have been used in charcuterie since the 1500s. In a good drying room, especially one that has been in use for a long time, the air is rich in the beneficial bacterium Lactobacillus, which helps to create an acidic environment. Acidity, in turn, prevents the growth of harmful bacteria. It's a balancing act, passed down through generations—a skill that is an important part of a culture's patrimony.

Even with the widespread use of refrigeration, the art of making charcuterie endures. Part of the reason has to do with taste—a great salami has the same complexity and layers of flavor as a well-aged wine or cheese. But it's not only hedonism that explains charcuterie's appeal. Brian Polcyn, the co-author of *Charcuterie: The Craft of Salting, Smoking, and Curing* and a charcuterie-maker himself, says: "The younger generation remembers that their grandparents used to make sausage. And they get into it for the love. It's a love affair. There's nothing like a beautiful sopressata or coppa. It's essential, there's a soul to this food." Polcyn considers Salumeria Biellese the best salumeria in the United States.

But back in 2002 being the best salumeria in the United States wasn't going to cut it with the USDA. It seemed as though Marc and Paul would either have to give up the old way of doing things or abandon salami-making

altogether. But then they started looking through the USDA literature and identified a scientist cited frequently by the USDA. They called this scientist and commissioned him to do a study that would replicate their recipes and aging processes. And they shelled out one hundred thousand dollars of their own money to pay for it. The scientist followed Salumeria Biellese's process to the letter, with one exception: He injected each product with pure *E. coli* and *L. monocytogenes*, producing much higher levels of bacteria than would normally be found in raw meat. Then he aged the products in the same way that they are aged at the salumeria. When the scientist tested the meats at the end of the aging period, he found that the very high levels of bacteria had been eliminated. Essentially, his study validated what centuries of practice had already demonstrated—that dry aging, when done knowledgeably and with care, makes raw meat safe to eat.

When presented with this study, the USDA conceded that Salumeria Biellese had proved its products to be safe and wholesome. These days, the salumeria simply needs to test each batch of dry-aged meat for bacteria before releasing it for sale. But because the scientist's study contains secret family recipes, its content is confidential, meaning that other small producers are still in the same difficult position as before, bearing the burden of having somehow to prove the safety of their process to the USDA. "We don't want the burden of regulations to make it impossible for people to be in business and make traditional products; that's not the result we want," Cohen emphasizes. But he admits that "it can be challenging for traditional processors to validate their processes."

So the salami maker fought the law—and he won. Both Marc and Paul are quick to say that the USDA representatives were very reasonable once they saw the study. But Marc contends that his victory is only part of a larger story. "We're going to lose the artisanal products of different cultures, because the mom and pops just can't fight this battle. They don't have the resources. The large producers are ecstatic. They have a lobby. They have Congress in their corner. And if they knock out two thousand little guys like us, the competition is gone."

To Marc, the whole dust-up indicates what he sees as a sea change in the way that meat regulation is done in this country—a shift from inspectors who were knowledgeable about meat to a regulating body more concerned about paperwork and litigation than actual food. "They come in and inspect your paperwork, not your meat," Marc says. "The inspectors used to smell, touch, feel. They used to know about meat. Not anymore."

One morning when I was in the shop, Salumeria Biellese's USDA inspector stopped by to tell Marc and Paul that it was his last day on the job—someone else would be taking over for him. The inspector was a slight, jovial man in a hardhat and heavy-duty work jacket. He, Marc, and Paul all slapped each other on the back. "You should come work for me now," Paul joked.

"These are good people," said the inspector to me, gesturing to Marc and Paul. "If you notice something, they take care of it. Their paperwork is in order, second to none." ●