

Hunters of Limavady - Deli the Doctor ordered



Just how you use a doctorate as a successful formula to run a multi award winning butchers shop and deli in Northern Ireland, probably takes a little more than an understanding of biochemistry but Ian Hunter used all his knowledge and experience when it came to rejuvenating this North West butchers.

A cut down apron had allowed Ian to work Saturdays in his fathers shop from an early age. However in 1972 the Irishman with roots in Galashiels left his native Limavady to spend what transpired to be eleven years in Glasgow. His destination was Strathclyde University to study biochemistry and immunology and his academic career lasted several years until he emerged with a PhD and a couple of fellowships.

Ian used his qualifications at Organon Laboratories in Lanarkshire and then Searle in High Wycombe but when the next move threatened to whisk him away to the States, the call of home was stronger. He explained:-

"I spent a year thinking about it before I made the move. My wife Liz and I felt that Limavady needed a deli. We had the butchers, we had the reputation but we had found in earlier days coming over here that if we wanted to make chilli con carne that we couldn't even buy chilli powder in this town. We talked to a few people and had a look around."

In Scotland the Hunters were fortunate to uncover Eilish Reid, a hidden talent that would end up a great find for their future plans:-

"Eilish has been with me for 17 years since leaving the catering department at Stirling University. She had a strong accent and I thought that was Scottish but discovered that she came from five miles up the road. The two of us went around Ireland looking at delis, health food shops, butchers.





Butchers: Alan Barbour, John Dickson, Nathan Whittaker-Williams, Mark Rodgers.



"My wife and I had a look at some in England and we decided that we were going to go for it.

"We slowly but surely increased the deli. We got the cooked meats going and we had 'half' a kitchen where we cooked."

There had been a butcher's shop on the site since 1923. Ian Hunter's father, Norman, took over O'Briens in 1946. He had worked there from the age of 12 and Ian returned to the business in 1992.



In 1998 the premises were bulldozed, front to back, and re-built from the foundations up. Turnover dipped during the six months that the business traded from temporary premises in the town leading Ian to question the wisdom of the grand project. Out of the dust and dirt however emerged not just a shiny new butchers shop but a true food emporium.



The meat counter is located at the back of the shop; on the right there is a hot food counter, a deli and cheese counter with a dairy case up the left stocking everything from milk to ready meals. In the central area is a hugely tempting array of mouth watering cakes and biscuits.

"We built it up slowly and it worked for us. We got a number of awards; the first award was Deli of the Year 2002 for Northern Ireland; we have won that twice and come second twice. We were Northern Ireland Butcher of the Year in

2004 and Institute of Meat Supreme Champion on three occasions – sausage, pies and barbecue products.”

Ian might just have started his cooked meat production with ‘half’ a kitchen but now he has a kitchen and a half in the purpose built facility above the shop that would be the envy of most.

“Believe it or not, even the cooked food has really only taken off in the last two and a half years. We worked very hard at it; we looked at supermarkets – Morrisons and Waitrose in England – to get ideas out of that, we looked at Marks and Spencer to see what they were doing and knew we could re-create what they had much cheaper.”

A wide range of foods is prepared daily on the premises with a home made taste that sees a sizeable quantity being sold over their hot food counter.

Very conscious that the wholesale business was taking all his good quality meat, Ian turned to concentrate on the retail side. An element of catering remains, the award winning Lime Tree Restaurant and a couple of convenience stores. Our forte is making sure that all our meat is hung and allowed to mature. Beef comes from Dungannon Meats and Doherty & Gray. They look after us very well, for example when it comes to Christmas beef we buy that in the last week in November and Brendon Doherty allows us to select our beef and hangs it for us. We get a specific quality.

“We bone all our own beef and mature our sirloins for four weeks, even our fillets get at least two weeks. A lot of



people would argue that I am wrong but it gives you a slightly drier consistency and also a better flavour. It works for us because we do not believe in tenderising. We only use the hand tenderiser if requested. Forequarters are used fresh but trade is predominantly hinds but I also think that lamb should be hung for two weeks.”

Open 8 till 5.30 Monday to Saturday Hunters employ 12 full time staff plus one Saturday 'girl'. Manager John Dickson is responsible for the timely delivery of fresh meat supplies and sales. Ian takes an interest in new product development and Eilish is a very knowledgeable deli manager and good at working with people.

“We use modern techniques with a traditional approach in everything we do” explained Ian who considers one of the shop’s greatest attractions to customers is the quality and its staff. On the butchers counter John, Alan, Nathan and Mark emit a great welcome and are always ready to help. That doesn’t come on its own and is obviously a result of Ian’s business ethos.

“We are very customer focussed, everybody knows everybody and we want to keep it that way. I believe that all my butchers should be trained and training is very important to our business. The same thing would happen on the deli side. I expect them to be knowledgeable. We try to encourage our deli staff to appreciate cheese although they all have their little blurbs on the characteristics each of the cheeses. We also encourage customers to taste the cheese and do tastings on a Saturday - cheese or sausages. It is amazing how it works.

“Getting feedback from your customers is very important. We do that even with the jams.”

There is a huge deli range. The laden shelves carry jams, sauces, biscuits and chutneys made from small specialist local suppliers. “We are finding that the deli side of the business is the growth side of the business. It has to be quality though. You have to know your customer base and our customers are looking for quality so that’s the way we have gone. Anything asked for that we don’t have is written in a book and we consider stocking this. For example we had requests for sushi so we brought in a range of Japanese products.”

Ian maintains that the success of the business is simple old fashioned ideas brought into the 21st century but with exemplary customer service in a pleasant, spacious, air conditioned setting. It is difficult, given such an array of goodies, to escape without succumbing to the temptation of all the wonderful delicacies.

More pictures at <http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/SFMTA1/HUNTERSLIMAVADY#>



(c) 2009 SFMTA



(c) 2009 SFMTA



(c) 2009 SFMTA