

## It's a Cracker!



The catchphrase of Belfast born comedian Frank Carson has never been a more appropriate description of a butcher's shop than the one featured this month. Yes it's in Northern Ireland but it's nothing to do with "the way I tell them."

In Greenvale Street in Ballymena there's one of those shops that you leave knowing that you just didn't quite take in all that's going on there. The recently gutted and refurbished building just bursts with enterprise and the front shop with its stunning Smeva display units is just the tip of the iceberg.

It took six months to transform the adjacent hairdressers and small butcher premises. McAtamneys have now been open since Halloween 2008. Design was completed by Belfast company, Soon Interiors, after research in Republic of Ireland and Holland.

As if the locally sourced beef, lamb, pork, own cured bacon, gammons and poultry with all the innovative products is not enough, it's the huge selection of ready prepared meals, pies, pastas and vegetables that are just impossible to take in on one visit. There's even haggis from reigning champion haggis maker, Dalbeattie Fine Foods.



Kieran McAtamney who runs the business in partnership with his son Gordon is not reticent to tell you that the average spend per customer is a very impressive £9.70.



It's easy to believe the turnover however, since the five shelf 20 foot run of dairy case is just loaded with temptation. Lots of goodies can be selected while listening to the soothing music system and an answer for just about every meal solution is covered.

Thrusting a pack of honey roasted winter vegetables into the camera Kieran explains "If I filled that space with bags of carrots selling

at 10p per lb. I'd probably make a few pounds off them by the end of the week, but if we wash them, peel them, slice them and present them ready to cook we will sell sacks of them."



Biting the proverbial carrot McAtamneys have developed added value in an exemplary way that even has surprised them. Above the front shop McAtamneys have a purpose built kitchen where from Monday to Saturday, fully qualified chef Tim Law leads a team of six. He is well equipped after years of cheffing in England and the Channel Islands but has returned to his birthplace.



Stews, soups, stuffed and sliced chicken, chicken stroganoff, fisherman's pie, Mediterranean potatoes and then desserts – crunchy cheesecake, banoffee pie, apple and rhubarb tarts and crumbles – all emanate from this extremely productive department. All the sauces are made from scratch and fresh herbs are used extensively.

*McAtamneys sleek modern shop is designed to do the business*



In a tongue that hides his Irish roots, Tim rattled off just a few of the delicacies in preparation that treat the 90,000 population of Ballymena and the surrounding area:-

"Everything is ready to eat. Deep Fried Brie with Cranberry sauce, Asian Beef Noodle Salad, Bacon Mash and Thai Chicken Curry are not the kind of thing that everyone would make. The mangoes are for the fruit salad, celeriac is going into the roasted root vegetables. They have also got fresh thyme and honey in them.

"Cauliflower and Broccoli, already partially cooked with white sauce and cheddar cheese on top is a great seller for us. Bake it in the oven. We like it all to be home made; once you taste it you realize that it tastes as good as what you'd make yourselves."

Tim's team are adding to their range almost every week but a good guess would put his team's repertoire at around 200. For a butcher's shop this is an impressive portrayal of massively successful diversification that would be hard to beat.



Enabling all this to happen Tim has two 10 rack Rationale ovens, two bratt pans, a frymaster, pastry mixer, robot coupe, Yang gas flushing sealer, blast chiller and Hobart tray washer.

Kieran is open to product ideas and he proudly pointed out his Turkey and Ham ready meals:-

"We sold hundreds and hundreds of them at Christmas. A lot of butchers won't sell them because it takes away from their turkey sales but if the customer is going to buy it in the supermarket then they are better to buy it here. So we sell it."



*Kieran's grandfather started a butchers' business in Killrea, County Derry in 1933. His father followed as did Kieran in 1968, but in 1977 he left to work in Maghera and then opened his own business in Ballymena in 1988. Kieran now works with his sons Peter (left) and Gordon (right).*

After all that there's no surprise to find out that McAtamneys' sausage trade has mushroomed with the great help of no fewer than 78 product certificates including the Ulster Pork and Beef Forum Best Pork Sausage title in 2004 and the 2007 Supreme Sausage Champion. Retailing 1800 lbs of sausages makes a major contribution to that average sales figure.

There is a home blended seasoning that makes all the difference but somewhat unusually for someone who has discovered an award winning recipe, Kieran is moving to reducing the salt levels and removing additives in his range of 15 different sausages, declaring that the fresh Antrim pork and the mixing technique has a major role to play.

Further up in the building there is the office, toilets and storage area. In total 22 employees work here. Out on the roof is one big pack that houses the three motors that serve all the refrigeration needs. A plate draws off 60% of the heat and that provides 60% of the premises hot water requirement. Somehow this is no surprise; it's just what you would have expected to finish it off.

The research put into coming up with McAtamney's retail concept has been very rewarding and the technology behind it all matches up. Trading from 7.00am to 6.00pm the business also boasts a fresh new corporate look in black and white and the total effect is just perfect.

Kieran set out to create something completely different. Some butchers lament because customers only visit them for special occasions but this business is not just a Christmas cracker. Customers could visit a nearby Tesco or Sainsburys but it's special everyday at McAtamneys in Ballymena.



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