

Story and photos by
Maria Buteux Reade



VERMONT PEOPLE

Wallingford Locker

A Little Old-Fashioned Meat Market Since 1961

IT BEGAN AS A TYPICAL ERRAND. HOLLY KEEFER stopped by Wallingford Locker in February 2007 to pick up some meat for dinner. While the butcher prepared her order, she noticed a slew of balloons taped to the walls. "That's how we'll remember our customers," owner Justin Courcelle explained. "We're closing the shop in two weeks."



She sees Holly Keefer is about to open the freezer and take off some of the meat. The key is to get the meat out of the freezer.

Holly went home but couldn't shake the idea. "I couldn't imagine Vermont without the Locker. My husband [George] was about to leave for so I thought, 'Just a couple of days later, I called my brother Will in Fair Haven and told him we were thinking about buying Wallingford Locker. And he said, 'You've got to be kidding me—I'm thinking about buying the Locker.' So I said, 'Why don't we go into this together?' We had about a week to make the decision."

Holly's next step: find a meat cutter. Her brother-in-law, Donny Keder, had spent 38 years in the retail grocery business working with meat, and he too was ready for a change. Meanwhile, Holly's brother and soon-to-be business partner Will house-hunted with another brother who was about to move from Virginia to Vermont. "It was crazy—Will was scrambling to help our brother find a place to live. I was pulling together the business plan and meeting with lawyers and accountants. But we knew this was a great opportunity for all of us, so we went ahead with it. And we never once regretted our decision. It's been a constant challenge but it's never dull!"

The small shop on Florence Street in Wallingford has operated as a meat locker since World War II. Customers can rent out metal drawers in a 20 below zero freezer to store their meat rather than invest in a chest freezer at home. The Courcelle family—Paul Sr., Paul Jr., and Justin—bought the business in 1961 and expanded it to include a retail butcher shop. The Courcelles started the smokehouse in the early 1970s and quickly gained national recognition for their cob-smoked hams and bacon.

The Courcelles agreed to remain open through Easter that spring to help with the transition. "The place didn't even close for a day while we transferred ownership," Holly notes proudly. "We never considered changing the name—in Vermont, you don't change, you tweak. We did make some improve-



The Locker's own posts on the store's porch. From left to right are Shawn Roudy, Alyssa Briggs, Ron Keder and Holly Keder. At right, Shawn displays the store's 1961 sign. Ron is in charge of the smokehouse, where it can be too warm to smoke and cure some of the Locker's custom products. The Locker opened from 1961 to 2007.

ments here and there but essentially the Locker has stayed the same. Customers were so thrilled they hadn't lost the Locker. They kept coming in and the business has run seamlessly ever since."

Justin Courcelle wasn't ready to retire and wanted to make sure the new team got off to a good start. He stayed on for the first nine months to train them in cutting, smoking and curing meats. Holly had taught chemistry at Fair Haven High School and at Courcelle State so she understood the science of brining and curing. She also had worked in financial planning, which gave her a solid grasp of the business end.

What distinguishes Wallingford Locker? The full flavor, preservative-free, and consistently high-quality products. "We try to ensure that the meat has been treated right from start to finish," Holly says. "We grind beef fresh every morning for our burgers, we make our own sausage, we cut our own steaks and roasts. That's what translates to the great old-fashioned flavor we're known for. When I can source meat from here in Vermont, I do, but I also don't want to start offering a meat that I can't get consistently and in the quantities we need here. We also have people who come in for unusual things. Pickled tripe? 'Smearhead'? We got 'ya covered. Ditto for beef tongue, broadside, and ox tail!"

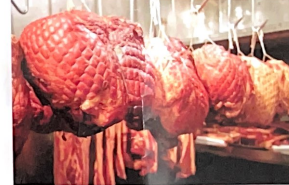
The Locker also stocks an impressive variety of flash-frozen meat wrapped snugly in white butcher paper; each package



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The Locker upholds its longstanding tradition of serving up both our customers and those who visit from other states, and is one of the few places left in Vermont to smoke and cure meat the old-fashioned way.



ment, I thought it was a sign or something. That was right after my brother had passed so it was a special honor. We're very grateful and amazed since we don't even advertise anywhere."

Family and tradition are keys to the Locker's success. That ethos is represented in a mural affixed to the storefront. The Courcelles had a longtime employee, Donna Wilkins, who was also a folk artist. When we took over, I hired her to paint us a mural with a rural American feel, with old-time colors and farm animals. This place has always been described as a little old-fashioned meat market so Donna worked that theme in there. Shawn, Ron, and Alyssa credit Holly for creating a work atmosphere with a strong emphasis on family. "We close at 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and at noon on Saturdays. Holly gives us Sundays off so we can have time with our families. That means a lot to us," says Shawn.

And what does the former chemistry teacher-turned-meat-vendor enjoy most? "Initially for me, it was working with my husband so I could see him. We got along great. And this job gave us some flexibility while we were raising our son. Of course it was fun to share this with my brother Will. But now it's also about being able to make our customers happy. We can provide them with the fiscal part of their family holiday, celebration, or just grilling out. There's a deep level of trust and respect the Locker has earned over the decades, and we're just carrying on that tradition."

Maria Buteux Reade has a home along the Batteaux Run in Arlington, VT. After 27 years teaching English, she now balances freelance writing with work at Somersby Farm in East Dorset.

JUST THE FACTS

Wallingford Locker
34 Florence Avenue
Wallingford, VT 05773
Call (802) 466-2420

Open Monday through
Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00
p.m., Saturday 8:00 a.m.
to noon. Cash or check
only.



By the Lockers: From close to a ribbed pork arm, a ham that was hand-painted by Denise Wilkins, a former sausage employee, before Holly checks inventory in a cooler within the sausage house.

The Lockers smoked more than 10,000 pounds of ham for the holidays alone—that's five tons! "And that doesn't include bacon," she adds with a smile. "We actually sell more ham at Thanksgiving and Christmas than we do at Easter. Many Vermonters pick up a Locker ham to go along with their turkey, and that was, everybody's covered."

Alayna Billings started working at the Locker when she was 19. She grew up on a dairy farm right down the road, and as a teenager, she learned to break down pigs and beef. "Alayna came with great knowledge and experience," Holly says. "And like Ron and Shawn, Alayna is an artist. She understands how to make a cut of meat look good." Alayna oversees front-of-house duties along with cutting and packaging. "I went to Stafford Tech and majored in hospitality and business management. That preparation translated into my skills in meat cutting. I enjoy working with meat and love the customer service aspect. And being with these guys makes it fun each day."

Willoughd Lockers has been voted the *Rutland Herald's* Best of the Best for the past several years. "I'm definitely not a competitor," she says, appreciative of the award. "I've definitely not a competitor. I've definitely not a competitor. I've definitely not a competitor."



Shawn Herlocker is the meat shop owner. Shawn and wife Pam began the business in 2003. The meat shop is wrapped by Alayna Billings in traditional white butcher paper and hand stamped.



hand-stamped with the cut of a pork arm, a customer has to grab packages of meat. "I've had a great time in place for about five years. We each have certain areas to oversee but we can all step up and jump in whenever needed. Everyone treats the customer right and takes ownership like this place is theirs. And that's wonderful to see."

Will's hand state Shawn Bandy, a bass guitarist and experienced cook, came on board to handle meat cutting and retail. "Holly showed me the ropes and I guess I'm doing something right because now she's not let me quit!" Shawn enjoys being part of a longstanding tradition. "We provide a place to store meat, buy meat, pick up some smoke and cure. And we get new customers each week. People come in and say they've had our meat at a friend's house, a church or fire department supper, or somewhere else. We get visitors from California, Texas, Washington, Florida, Virginia, all over New England. People who have come to Vermont and found our products."

Holly's husband George had overseen the smoker for 20 years. "I've learned it up and taught me everything to know how to do it in five people in Vermont know how to smoke and cut in a fashionable way we do here and there it's all retired. I'm 65 years old."

"Smoking is cold, wet work with a lot of heavy lifting. It is also an art. At the Locker, everything is done by hand—no technology, no machines. Some places rely on computers in inspect curing solutions," Ron explains. "It takes me two weeks to smoke and cure some of our custom products. That provides a depth of flavor you can't get from a computer. The smoker has to run for seven to nine hours at a specific temperature to meet state inspection regulations. We smoke ham, pork chops, kielbasa, peppercorn, hot dogs, baby back ribs, bacon, turkey drumsticks, some of our deli meats, and cheese." Willoughd Lockers is the only daily licensed facility in the state permitted to do retail as well as custom cutting and smoking. Ron coordinates with people who raise their own pigs and sent the meat converted into custom-smoked ham and bacon.

"The smokehouse is awesome," Holly confirms. "We do a job smoke that's kind and gentle. A lot of people find hand-work is too harsh or acrid so they love the unique flavor of our cold-smoke. It marries really well with pork so we sell a lot of bacon and ham. We have people come from all over who say they won't eat ham, but they'll drive for hours to get one of ours. Our customers believe in a better way with bacon!"

Last Christmas, the Lockers had a competition to see who could give away many pounds of ham were smoked between Thanksgiving and Christmas. "The closest person was a little over 6,000 pounds," Holly recalls. "And that still left short!"

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Grateful for the Past, Looking to the Future

For more than a decade, the farm operated under Adam's vision and management, and now Jessica has come on board; they are figuring out the direction of the business, together. "With a perennial farm, nothing is quick," Adam notes. "We make mental changes, no spontaneous pivots. As a perennial grower, you need to be able to plan at least 10 years out. And so can do that here in Charlotte."

"When our farm was located at the Intervale, it served as a place for people living in the city to connect with nature and their food source," says Jessica. "When we moved, we were proud about losing some of our local customers but the majority of our customers have followed us here. Our farm has become a summer destination and families will often spend the day here."

Jessica admits she sometimes misses weeding carrots or hauling in a good load of potatoes or zucchini from the field. "I still love what we do. We have a greater connection to the land now that we live on the farm. This is our home, part of the reason we have a greater intimacy with the ground."

Adam adds, "It's powerful to grow food for our community. People sometimes ask us why we've been successful, and I credit the greater Burlington area, and now Charlotte, for their awareness and support of healthy, organic food. They're in business when we started and have sustained us ever since, and when people come back from pick-your-own with trays of berries, I'm still amazed at the beauty of the bounty. Even after 20 years, the fruit still inspires us to go."

Maia Blevins Beale has a home along the Battlement Road in Arlington, VT. After 27 years teaching English, she now balances freelance writing with work at Sunday Farm in East Dorset. Dan Moore, longtime commercial and landscape photographer based in Montpelier, VT, offers editorial and photographic tours from one hour to a full day led in this issue.

JUST THE FACTS

Adam's Berry Farm
985 Benjam Brook Road
Charlotte, VT 05445

Call (802) 578-9093 or visit Adam'sBerryFarm.com.
Farm stand opens from June to October.
Monday through Saturday 9-6, Sunday 9-4.
Pick-your-own raspberries and blueberries from July through September and P20 pumpkins in October.



The Berry Farm stands in number from about 12 at the beginning and end of each season to as many as 12 during the height of harvest. It's probably more people management than encouraged, says Adam. "That's part of the business."

