

100 Most Influential Georgians • Hall of Fame

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THE ART OF SAUSAGE MAKING

In Georgia, it's often a family enterprise

By Krista Reese

CONSIDER THE WONDROUS SAUSAGE BISCUIT: A THING OF SIMPLE BEAUTY, with browned bits of spiced pork between fresh-baked bread. Those of us who are old enough, and came from an agrarian background, remember when it was a part of a much larger breakfast – every single day, with eggs and juice and coffee and jam. Farm-style eating is hard to kick, even when you've transitioned into a white-collar world – but it quickly catches up when you're no longer plowing the north 40 after sunup.

Soon sausage was relegated to special occasions, like the holiday-and-bridal shower fixture, the sausage-cheese ball. "It's such a flavor burst," says former *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* food editor and cookbook author Susan Puckett. "I hardly ever make any kind of meat sauce or meat loaf without thinking, 'This would be better if at least a little of it were sausage.'"

To Southerners, sausage represents much more than just flavor, and its disappearance from our daily diet marks so many other changes that came in so little time: The sausage in that biscuit once likely came from a little neighborhood grocery store – even the smallest usually had a meat department – and got there from a nearby farm or slaughterhouse. Or maybe someone at home made it, with the manual meat-grinder vice-gripped to the countertop, once a fixture in nearly every kitchen. Homemakers laboriously cranked the handle as they fed in whole cuts of meat, forcing them into the natural casings they found in most supermarkets.

Now, of course, the sausage biscuit often comes from a fast-food window, its origins lost in myriad sources. Like a lot of other food in the U.S., quality, character and flavor gave way to speed, low cost and convenience. Always a "processed" food, homemade sausage was one of the first indigenous Southern staples to disappear when those little farms

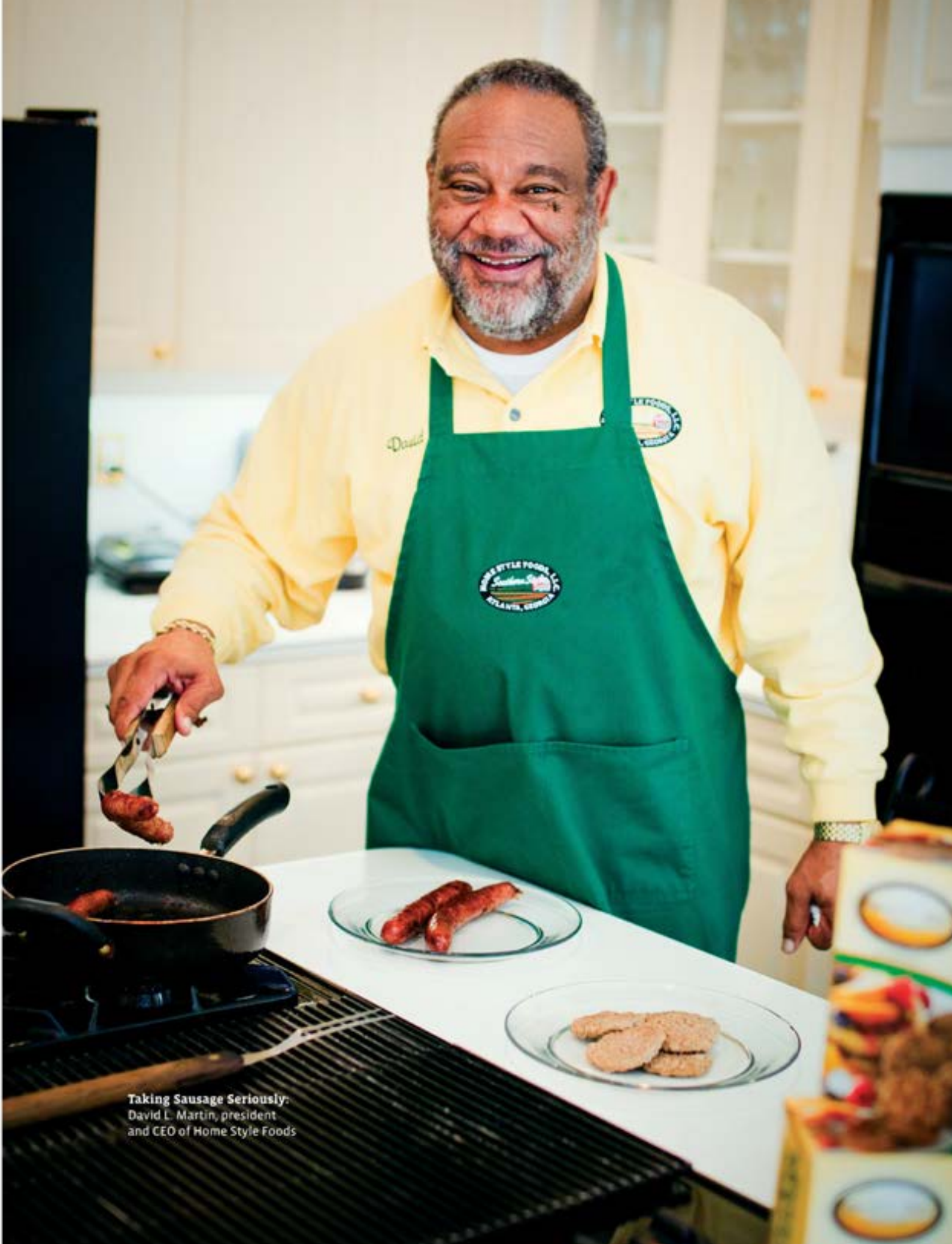
and meat producers gave way to names like Jimmy Dean, Eckrich and Oscar Mayer, in the same way that those little stores gave way to Target, Walmart and Kroger.

Today, as more people want to know where their food is coming from and how it's made, some of those old foodways are being rediscovered. Once viewed as suspiciously "unhealthy," meat is back on the table, advanced in part by the low-carb diet craze of the last decade and in part by chefs and diners.

In Atlanta, restaurants like Abattoir, Holeman & Finch and even burger palace Flip celebrate traditional meat-grinding and smoking methods with farm-raised, grass-fed beef and hormone-free pork. At Atlanta gourmet market Star Provisions, Todd Immel makes a variety of sausages from hormone-free Alabama pork, costing up to \$6.75 a pound. "They're doing very well," he says.

Between the meat-industry giants and the small, gourmet enterprise is another business model – the sausage maker who passes along a generations-old recipe, adapting traditional methods to government requirements far stricter than anything in the founder's day. In Georgia, sausage making is often a family enterprise, with third- or fourth-generation descendants following recipes that were born in grocery stores with sawdust-strewn floors. "It's exactly how we did

ADAM KOWICZ



Taking Sausage Seriously:
David L. Martin, president
and CEO of Home Style Foods

it 45 years ago," says Ricky Hardin of Stripling's, based in Cordele.

"We still do things pretty much exactly as we did 40 years ago," says Homer Holifield Jr. of Covington-based Holifield Farms, "except it's a whole lot cleaner."

Government requirements have perhaps dictated the biggest changes to sausage making. Interstate sales require federal inspections and detailed logs on temperature and storage; some larger customers also require their own inspections.

David Lee, whose grandfather D.L. "Dave" Lee started D.L. Lee & Sons in Alma in the 1930s, says the business began with a meat market on downtown Alma's Wall Street, with meat deliveries to Waycross icehouses. Sausage making was added in the late '40s.

Last year D.L. Lee saw \$65 million in sales across six states, and brother Jerry Lee says his 120,000-square-foot plant is "cleaner than your kitchen." Many customers buy "boxes and boxes" of sausage to take back to places it isn't sold, because to them "it tastes like home."

While most of the state's old-style sausage makers have, like nearly every business, suffered in the recent economic downturn, many have done surprisingly well. Smithfield, the Virginia-based meat producer with \$12 billion in sales, "closed 20 plants last year," says Jerry Lee. Some local producers are looking at ways to expand; others are focusing on core products.

LIFELINE

For the Hardin family, sausage making began as a lifeline after their farming operation succumbed to late 1970s drought and interest rates. "We bought the business from my uncle," Hardin says, largely because it was housed in a small building next to their property. Once Hardin left farming and took a job, he started thinking about his uncle's sausage making again. "Working six to seven days a week for someone else, I figured I might as well try to make something out of it," he says.



Unique Process: Ricky Hardin of Cordele-based Stripling's

WWW.HERBPOUCHER.COM

Now based in a general store with two other retail locations, boasting the unbeatable motto, "You never sausage a place!" Stripling's cleaves to a unique sausage making process that results in a singularly flavorful bite. This "fermented" sausage, made from "hot" meat, earns its name from the fact that it is made the same day the hog is killed, before the meat is chilled.

"Warm meat draws in seasoning," explains Hardin. "Cold meat is seasoned just on the outside."

Stripling's grinds the meat only one time, through a small grinder plate, and the seasoning is added by hand. "It's a different texture," he says.

Stripling's uses whole hogs (that is, all five prime cuts: ham, tenderloin, belly, picnic shoulder and butt, rather than just one), only natural casings, hickory smoke and no artificial prod-

ucts in their fresh and smoked sausages, seasoned largely with sage, salt, and red and black pepper. Last year the company sold \$6 million worth of products in their retail outlets alone, and Hardin says their website (www.striplings.com) is taking in more business every day. The company also sells ham, barbecue, bacon, Brunswick stew, jams, jellies and steak, and is considering adding a line of frozen casseroles incorporating their sausage.

BESTSELLER

David L. Martin, President and CEO of Stockbridge-based Home Style Foods, says his company's best-selling product is the Southern-Style Premium Smoked Sausage. Naturally smoked, with no water added, the sausage has been the mainstay since the time the company was started by former state senator Hildred

Shumake (who apparently, despite the famous warning, was not afraid to watch both laws and sausages being made).

After Shumake's death, Martin, once Shumake's lawyer, bought the company from another man, Len Parks, who developed the sausage recipe and added an image of a beloved uncle, Walter L. Parks to the label.

Martin has recently updated his website (www.homestyle-foods.com) and product line to focus on his premium pork and turkey sausages.

"One thing that will not change," he says, "is the picture of the black man on the label." Martin says that although Walter Parks is no longer alive, his image clicks with customers because "he looks like a man who knows how to stoke a fire and smoke some meat."

In business since 1959, Holifield Farms got its sausage-making start under father-and-son farmers Homer and Homer Grier Holifield. "We were originally cotton farmers, but that changed once the boll weevil got through with us," says President Homer Grier Holifield Jr., son and grandson of the founders. The insect that "cleaned every plow around here" forced the family to focus on a business it once did as a sideline or favor to neighbors and friends.

Today, Holifield's MSG- and artifi-



Sideline To Mainstay: Homer Grier Holifield Jr., president of Holifield Farms in Covington

Some Georgia sausage makers:

D.L. Lee & Sons

927 Highway 32 E.
Alma, GA 31510
912.632.4406
www.dllee.com

Holifield Farms

72 Holifield Road
Covington, GA 30016
770.786.2086
www.holifieldsausage.com

Homestyle Foods

3588 Highway 138 S.E.
Stockbridge, GA 30281
678.669.2909
www.homestyle-foods.com

Lord's Sausage & Country Ham

310 S. Line St.
Dexter, GA 31019
478.875.3101
www.lordssausage.com

Roger Wood Foods

P.O. Box 2926
7 Alfred Street
Savannah, GA 31408
912.652.9600
www.rogerwoodfoods.com

Salt Lick Sausage Co.

2346 Georgia Highway 300 S.
Cordele, GA 31015
229.535.6328

Stripling's

2289 Georgia Highway 300 S.
Cordele, GA 31015
229.535.6561 (plus two other retail locations in Cordele and Moultrie)
www.striplings.com

Sunset Farm Foods

1201 Madison Highway
Valdosta, GA 31601
800.882.1121
www.sunsetfarmfoods.com

cial-additive-free fresh ground sausage is sold all over the state, in grocery stores like Publix, Kroger and Ingles. "We've always worked on the theory that the meat and seasonings should speak for themselves," he says.

FOUR GENERATIONS

Sunset Farms' president, Tom Carroll, is the fourth generation Carroll to run the company since his great-grandfather's founding of the Valdosta business in 1918. "We're still sitting on the same land," he says. He uses both natural and liquid smoke, but no sodium nitrate or artificial ingredients in the whole-hog sausage, Carroll says.

"Everybody's processing has changed over the years, but we have maintained the same flavor profile," Carroll, 44, returned to the family business after working in computer systems, knowledge that he has applied to the family business. "I saw the opportunity to be a part of something bigger – part of the tradition," he says. "It's much more attractive now than when I was a kid," he admits. The company's recent introduction into Atlanta-area Krogers is "a big break for us," he says. His father, Jimmy Carroll, 71, still works most days.

Most Georgia sausage makers say their biggest problem is finding good producers – only Stripling's works with one particular farmer, year in and year out. "It gives us control over every aspect," Hardin says, since he knows what the pigs will be fed and how that will affect the meat. "It's costly, but worth it."

In fact, that could sum up most of Georgia's heritage sausage makers – most have slightly higher price points, but proudly point to the premium product behind the cost. It still can be a wondrous thing, that sausage biscuit.

"Reprehensible as it sounds to modern ears, hog-killing time was once a celebration," says Puckett. "It was a time of sharing and sustenance, and nothing went to waste. To Southerners, pork is still symbolic of survival and community. It connects us to who we are and provides understanding of what the land gives you."

Holifield has another way of saying that: "If people were a little more grounded, they wouldn't have to have so much to be entertained," he states. "We try to entertain people a little with our sausage."

