



Cumberland Gap Provision In The News

UNCOMMONLY CURED; HAM SERVED FAMILY-STYLE WITH THICK SLICE OF GOOD HUMOR

MIDDLESBORO, Ky. -- Like the frontier men who found the Cumberland Gap, Ray McGregor came into this Appalachian area and made a discovery.

The former Ohioan bought a closed meat-packing plant in Middlesboro in 1979 and, with his family and employees, turned his discovery into a million-dollar ham and sausage business -- Cumberland Gap Provision Co.

Everyone in the plant knows Ray McGregor and, in turn, he calls almost every employee by name.

McGregor is chief operating officer of Cumberland Gap Provision. His son, R.D. McGregor, is president, and his daughter, Christy McGregor, is in charge of customer relations and transportation.

The company produces smoked ham, sausage and specialty pork products. He's proud it's an employee-owned company, and he's proud of its premium items.

When he started, McGregor says, he sold 100,000 pounds a week; it's now up to 1 million pounds a week.

Undergoing its fourth expansion, the plant is in Middlesboro's industrial park. The products are sold commercially only -- you cannot go to the plant and buy ham or sausage. But many of the products are sold in stores in Middlesboro, as well as in groceries and markets throughout the country. (Food City stores, Bob Evans Farms and Sysco Foods are customers, and McGregor occasionally sells to Knoxville's Ham 'n' Goodies.)

His product labels depict a Volunteer mountain man with a musket and say "Cumberland Gap," but he also makes products for private labels.

Friendly and outgoing, McGregor is a born salesman, which is how he started in the ham and sausage business in Ohio. His eyes twinkle, and he has a wonderful sense of humor.

In his office is a large painting of Daniel Boone coming through the Cumberland pass, and McGregor laughs as he says it looks just like him. "He had a McGregor with him, and McGregor buried the recipe," he says of his "secret" ham and sausage directions.

Donning a white lab coat and cap, we join him on a tour of the plant. The aroma of ham penetrates the different areas, though the McGregors say they are so used to it they don't even notice. Areas are constantly cleaned, and equipment is spotless.

He says he processes the "old-fashioned way" and uses no artificial flavors.

McGregor reaches into a pan and pulls out a handful of hickory sawdust he uses for smoking. "It's natural. We don't use liquid smoke."

Hickory-smoked ham is his major product; hot dogs are the minor product but are his favorite. He has several kinds of smoked sausages, as well as smoked pork chops and loins. Spiral-sliced hams are a trendy item, often selected by consumers for holiday meals, but bone-in ham is also a big item during the holidays.

"It's a changing consumer market," he says.

"We were one of the first to come out with fat-free hams. That was 20 years ago." He says this requires extensive laboratory facilities -- which he has -- because a company must be able to prove it is 95 to 96 percent fat-free.

Newest in his line are diced and chunked ham. He uses 40,000 to 50,000 pounds of ham a week for slicing and chunking. The small packages are aimed at quick-meal convenience, and the packages are microwavable.

Two small, boneless ham steaks are packaged for an easy-supper selection. He offers a 3-pound boneless ham and sliced smoked sausage in small packages, too.

Because the hams are smoked and cured, they can be eaten "as is," but most people want to bake the hams, perhaps with their own glaze; he likes brown sugar and cloves. The spiral hams come with a glaze.

He doesn't produce country ham but says that may be "down the road."

McGregor likes the Middlesboro location because it is centrally located so he can ship to all parts of the United States overnight. He has customers in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Florida, Texas, Ohio, Indiana, New York and Connecticut. Trailer-loads of his sausage go to the New Orleans markets.

When he first started the company, he had outside capital, but in 1990 he bought those investors out and made it an employee-owned company. He now is one of the "biggies," up there with Sara Lee, Smithfield and ConAgra. "There aren't many companies this size left," he says. He's had offers to sell, and he's felt the "pressure" of the big guys, but he continues to keep the company family-employee owned. Each quarter, 15 to 20 percent of the pretax profits go back to the employees.

The company has spent \$10 million in the last several years for expansion and food safety. A quality-control lab offers constant monitoring of the plant.

Ham is on his menu, "every day," and he says ham is always on the Thanksgiving table. "We also have a little turkey, too, to know how the rest of the world lives."

He shares a recipe for ham and sausage "souffle" casseroles he made in the plant's test kitchen for us to taste at lunch. He jokes with Tim Kreiter, who is in charge of technical operations and quality control and is one of the men who came with him from Ohio in 1979, and tells him to "pick up a severance check" when Kreiter dropped and broke the third casserole before lunch.

Cooking is one of McGregor's loves, and he laughs as he says that when he retires he'll play more golf and do more cooking. "I added fresh sliced mushrooms (to the casserole) today. I'm always experimenting."

His favorite food is a McGregor hot dog: He wraps it in strips of bacon, microwaves it until it is "almost done," splits it and tops it with cheese and chopped bacon before placing it under a broiler.

He likes to wrap a ham in foil and bake it 15 minutes a pound at 325 degrees. Open the foil the last half hour, he suggests, score it, and add brown sugar and ground cloves.

* For information, call Cumberland Gap Provisions, 1-606-248-3311 or visit the Web site, www.cumberlandgapprovision.com.

Louise Durman may be reached at 342-6432 or durman@knews.com.

Copyright © 2000, The Knoxville News-Sentinel Co. All Rights Reserved.