



PALLISER
ALBERTA SOUTHEAST

BIG SKY. ENDLESS OPPORTUNITIES.

SUCCESS STORY

Seven Persons Premium Sausage

When Ralph and Elaine Erb realized none of their children were going to take over their beloved – and renowned – Premium Sausage, a Seven Persons' landmark for two decades, they decided to sell it to folks who understood and appreciated the business.

It's been more than a year since Mark and Debra Penner took over Premium Sausage in mid-2009, but rumour has it the garlic coils, beef sticks and Mennonite sausage are still being manufactured to the same high standards that have made them and the many other Premium products such favourites in southern Alberta during the years.

In fact, the "Quick food; old-fashioned flavor" is still more a promise than a motto. That's the way Ralph Erb planned it when he took his sausage-making talents from his Seven Persons hog farm to an ATCO trailer on the advice of friends in 1990.

The 12x40-foot trailer, with cooler and smokehouse, soon became a stopping spot for Highway 3 travelers looking for quality cured meats. Within nine months, Erb and his partner hired Mark Penner as a meat cutter. Later, a second trailer was added and by 1996, Erb obtained a portable building the local school no longer required and modified it to his needs.

Today, on the same spot on the south side of Highway 3, Premium Sausage is in a new, funky elevator-shaped building with 16 employees.

It took Mark Penner about 6 hours, upon hearing Ralph Erb's plans to sell Premium Sausage, to know he wanted to buy it. Three months later,

the deal was done and by Nov. 1, 2009, the Penners took ownership.

The Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC) liked the idea of the business transitioning to the Penners from the Erbs, especially given Mark's experience in the business and specifically with Premium Sausage.

The sale, for Erb, was sweet. He had turned over his baby to an owner who had been there almost from the beginning and knew how to retain the quality to which customers had come to expect. Mark and Debra, meanwhile, with four grown children, were in a position to own their own business. The couples were already friends, so exchanging keys to the building was a joyous occasion for both.

Debra Penner, born and raised in Seven Persons, a tight-knit community of some 240 souls, is the school librarian in town. She met Mark, originally from Ontario, at the Medicine Hat church where his father served as pastor. All the couple's children have, at some point, worked at Premium Sausage.

A few houses down live the Erbs; their children grew up and played with the Penner kids, and an Erb offspring is still employed at Premium. He'll be in one of the photos in a display the Penners are creating to include every Premium employee since the store opened. They'll hang one of the barn-board frames in the store, and present a second to Ralph. The Penners are determined to track down 20 years of employees to obtain their photos.

Today, despite the growing workforce at Premium Sausage, all but one employee is from Seven Persons.

"Community is what made this place and it's nice to give back and contribute to the community," says Mark.

And "community" is where Premium will stay: 95 per cent of the product is sold from the Seven Persons outlet. A ring or two is sold at Nutter's in Medicine Hat and Jenner Sales and Service. Mark will deliver no charge to Medicine Hat on orders over \$50, but the Penners are not looking

for a distribution network.

Premium Sausage combines Alberta beef, pork, elk and other meats with its own spices to create its products, all of which contain no preservatives or fillers. They've always been gluten and MSG free.

The Penners focus on lean pork and beef trim, some 250,000 pounds of meat annually, in their sausage to make a leaner product. While 80 per cent of their business comes from products sold in the retail shop, the rest is made up of custom finishing for farmers and hunters who bring in their own meat. Premium Sausage's main focus for 20 years though has been farmer style sausage.

Over the years, the line has diversified to include variations such as extra garlic, maple smoky, sausage-stuffed pork tenderloin, etc., but the basic product remains the same.

"The sausage we made 20 years ago is still the sausage we make today," says Mark, who has never advertised that the business is "under new management." Premium also sells baked goods made by a woman in the community with a health-unit-certified kitchen. She, too, once worked at Premium Sausage. Products sold from local suppliers include perogies from Medicine Hat, Kuchen from Bow Island, and preserves from Lethbridge.

Mark stresses customer service; his leadership style empowers staff to enforce policies and programs to optimize that goal. It works: in 2010, Premium Sausage was nominated for the Customer Service Excellence Award through the Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce.

The combination of highway location and curious elevator shape, have helped attract the curious. That, plus a quality product and strong reputation keep the business strong. Customers return from as far away as Winnipeg and Victoria.

Mark and Debra work with local school and sports organizations to assist with fundraising. All of which gives Premium Sausage a premium place in the life of Seven Persons.



Elevated success: Premium Sausage is a Seven Persons standout, on the street and in the kitchen.

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