

# The Return of the Local Butcher Shop

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**O**n May 19, 2016, Peter and Keri Baarda took ownership of J & G Quality Meats on Plains Road in the Aldershot neighbourhood of Burlington. After some consideration it was decided to keep the name and although Peter questioned his decision “as everything that could be changed inside the store has changed”, he wanted to honour the 54 years of history shaped by the two previous owners.

One of the big changes was the introduction of a dry-age program. Even before the store was officially theirs, Peter placed an order with his beef supplier knowing he had to have meat aged and ready to go for the counter. And at the time of interview, prime rib was already aging for Christmas orders. The counter is also filled with antibiotic-free chicken and pork, local lamb and some select game meats.

What didn't change was the presence of previous owner, Peter Smolenaars. Peter offered to stay on for a month to help with the transition but three weeks in asked if he could stay, explaining, “You made it fun again. Everything is different and I want to see it succeed. Keeps me young.” At 71, owner Peter calls him the energizer bunny and is happy to have his help and expertise.



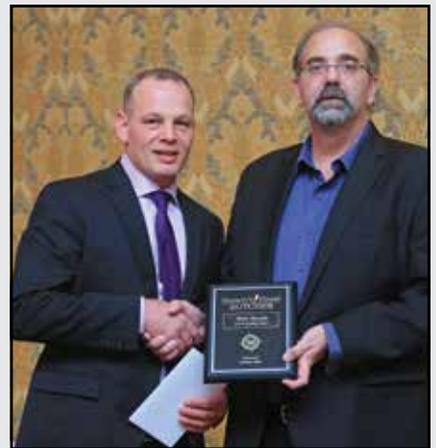
Peter's wife Keri offers much support to the business too, completing paperwork, paying bills, meeting with the inspector, helping out up front. Keri also manages the summertime market at the Burlington mall. “It's a bit crazy,” says Peter. “One thousand people are there at once and ready to shop.”

Seven employees strong, a young butcher named Josh is already practicing to represent J & G in the next butcher competition, coached by both Peter's. “Any butcher who's any good learns from more than one teacher,” says Peter, he himself having learned different skills from an estimated 10-15 other butchers before developing his own style. “He's a leftie though which looks weird - like he's going to cut himself. But I can stand across the table from him and he mirrors what I do. It works.”



Peter's customers include the affluent residents in the surrounding neighbourhood he describes as hard-working from all walks of life. Young families ranging to older ladies who don't drive but manage to make it into the store for the ‘half and half’ cream Peter stocks just for them, albeit reluctantly. “I wouldn't choose to take up space in a butcher shop with milk and butter but what can I do? These customers can't make it here AND to the grocery store.”

## Ontario's <sup>!</sup>Finest BUTCHER



Left to right: Pete Baarda, J & G Quality Meats, Joe Abate, OIMP Past President) **Ontario's Finest Butcher 2016** - Facing off against Brent Herrington, Herrington's Quality Butchers, Port Perry, and Nicholas Matusiak, Halenda's Meats, Oshawa, Peter took highest marks from a combined score of judges and delegates at OIMP's The Meating Place. Each butcher had a whole rabbit, chicken, and veal loin from which to prepare merchandisable cuts ready for the barbecue within the allotted half hour.



Peter's first year will continue to be a test year, seeing what works, what the sales are like at different times. “I had to predict numbers for my business plan but I didn't have the history. What I do have is an accountant that tells me every week I was wrong - over here, under there,” he laughs. “This year is a big learning curve, finding the trends; it's different then what I expected. Who knew people would buy that much stewing beef in the summer?”

One of the many things he did get right was to stock tomahawk steaks in the counter almost right from the beginning. “Even Tuesdays and Wednesdays, which I thought might not be the smartest thing to do, but father’s day was coming up and I wanted people to remember the tomahawk steaks.”



heads’ is long past us,” Peter says. “The level of skill in the finals as well as the preliminary rounds is proof of that. I’m so proud to have cut alongside the other competitors. These are the people that are going to bring the local butcher shops back to the forefront. Bringing skill back to our trade.” ■



*“Membership is important to stand together as a unified body but more importantly it’s like your family. You don’t always see your cousins but when you do it’s like no time has passed. You start talking like its nothing. That’s pretty cool. Hopefully I’ll never have to call on OIMP for something serious, but it’s good to know they’re there if I need them.”*

~ Peter Baarda

And it worked. Although not just for father’s day, a dad who was hosting a barbecue for his engaged son, saw the steaks when shopping one night then returned another day and ordered 25 tomahawks. “He wanted the party to be unique. Nice wine and great food. Afterwards he posted photos on Facebook and the amount of people that came in because of that one barbecue is incredible. He lives right around the corner and every one of his neighbours shop here now, his son comes in as well. It’s true what they say about word of mouth,” says Peter.

Building on the momentum created by positive word of mouth, J & G uses a Facebook page and Twitter for promotion, plus outside signage. They also sample on weekends whatever they want to push - bacon, sausage, etc. And although they close at five they leave the door open while they are still cleaning up so those last minute shoppers can get in and still grab dinner.

Whatever the day or the reason, people want to talk directly to the butcher. “It’s about trust,” says Peter. “If they don’t trust you, they’ll second guess everything you sell. I love when people come in and ask ‘what’s for supper?’”

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“To be part of people’s celebrations is everything. Before the shop, I used to have extra time. Now its early mornings, its late suppers. But it’s fulfilling what we do here.”

And what Peter does, he does well, taking home the title of Ontario’s Finest Butcher three years running. “The days of butchers just being ‘meat

