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Business

After 25 years in business, Dewar's still 'meating' demand for high-end product

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As supermarket chains and food service distributors began expanding their meat offerings, most people stopped going to specialty butcher shops to buy their meat and poultry. Many independent butchers have closed their doors in recent years.

Yet Wellesley resident John Dewar has not only survived, but thrived in the business.

Dewar, who moved to town from Sherborn last year, launched John Dewar & Co. Inc., a meat and gourmet specialty retail shop and wholesale business, 25 years ago at 753 Beacon St. in Newton. Dewar, who wanted to strike out on his own after working for his cousin's meat business for 15 years, launched the operation in September 1978 with two of his co-workers.

The three put up their life savings to purchase an ailing kosher butchery, where Dewar's retail shop still stands today. Although the trio really knew nothing about running a retail business - their strength was in wholesale - they hired people who had the necessary experience.

Their operation was so successful that they recently celebrated 25 years in business, and Dewar, 61, who spends a lot of time exercising at the gym, said he has no plans to slow down anytime soon. (One of his cofounders, Fred Donovan, has retired, and the other, his wife, Bonnie Welch, died of breast cancer in 2002). He looks forward to sticking with the business and maybe even expanding on its retail side. According to Dewar, 85 percent of the business is wholesale, and the remaining 15 is retail.

"Our success is directly tied to our wholesale business," said Dewar, who runs the wholesale business out of Boston, serving high-end restaurants, hotels and catering companies. "We're able to purchase product directly from Midwest suppliers, encompassing lamb, veal, pork and beef, and make deliveries [to 'customers'] two to three times a day. It gives us the advantage of having a complete product line all the time without any outages.

"Having the wholesale business allows us to treat the store as a customer. It gives us a great leg-up because we're buying fancy quality meat for restaurants and hotels, so the store always has the finest product available."

Dewar said his wholesale business buys hundreds of boxes of product each week, and then processes each product based on customer orders. The retail store then receives a line of consistent and high-quality meats, as well.

"The wholesale side really is the building block, and foundation of [the company]," Dewar said.

Dewar attributes his company's staying power to



Wellesley resident John Dewar is celebrating his 25th year in the specialty meat business.

"having a work ethic, knowing what I wanted to do, and having a goal of becoming successful in this business."

A little luck never hurt, either.

Shortly after Dewar and his colleagues opened the butcher shop, an area cookbook author and teacher who ran a nearby cooking school stopped by because she was looking for high-quality meats and products. The teacher, Madeline Kamman, enjoyed Dewar's products so much, she passed his name on to local chefs and caterers. From there, his reputation and business took off, Dewar said. His company today is a \$12 million enterprise.

Dewar, who serves Boston hotel clients such as the Colonnade and the Bostonian, and high-end restaurants such as L'Espalier in Boston and a slew of smaller lavish restaurants, also thinks his success has something to do with a shift in the public's eating habits. Dewar also serves high-end catering companies; some are in Brookline, Cambridge and Watertown.

"Food started becoming popular," Dewar said.

Consumer palates became much more sophisticated by the mid-1980s, and "young fellows just coming out of culinary school, being the pioneers that they were, started demanding fresh ducks, game and other hard-to-get items," he said. "They were opening their own restaurants, and we made a business out of supplying these small restaurants with the products they were reading and dreaming about."

John Dewar & Co., in addition to offering prime and aged beef, poultry, pork and lamb, features

high-quality products that are usually hard to find in supermarkets, such as farmed game, including free-range chicken, pheasants, squab, venison, partridge, pousin, rabbit and quail. He's also carrying Japanese-style Kobe beef, which is somewhat new to the store and not sold in most supermarkets. There is also a complete line of more than 75 domestic and imported cheeses, Hudson Valley foie gras, Boyajin caviar, vinegars, coffees and other items.

While supermarket chains are major competitors for John Dewar & Co., Dewar singled out two free-standing retail stores, Savor's in Boston, and T.F. Kinnealey & Co., out of Milton, as businesses that parallel his own on both the wholesale and retail sides. Dewar called John Kinnealey, the president of T.F. Kinnealey Co., "a friend and friendly competitor."

"John's been nothing but good competition [for us]," said Kinnealey. "Meaning that from pound to pound, choice to choice, prime to prime, if he says he's going to do something, he does it," said Kinnealey. "It makes for good competition because the products they're buying are ostensibly correct, service levels are where they need to be to satisfy an account, and he's a nice guy to boot."

"He's got his head screwed, on straight," Kinnealey added. "He's up front with people and when he says he's going to something, he does it."

Jack Callahan, a retail customer of John Dewar & Company since the first week opened, has always bought his family's meat there.

"His product is terrific, it's consistently good, we usually call and get one big order," said Callahan. "The service is great, the people who work there are very knowledgeable, and if you want to buy something they tell you how to cook it. They're good people."

Although the praise Dewar receives from his clientele is glowing, the businessman and butcher remains modest. He said he's thrilled that people pay him such nice compliments, yet his main objective remains to provide the highest quality of meat around, and to do so with top-notch service. He hasn't forgotten what's gotten his business so far, either.

"To succeed in this business, we've gone out of our way to establish long-term relationships and to build a trust with our customers both at the wholesale and the retail level," said Dewar. "Our customers trust us, they have faith that we're checking things and buying the right product."

"As a matter of fact, we're getting new customers because we've built a reputation, and some people are more comfortable buying here than an average supermarket."