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Best for breakfast

The success of its breakfast sandwiches keeps Williams Sausage growing



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Making the best out of breakfast

Williams Sausage's steady growth is due in part to its popular line of breakfast sandwiches.

BY SAM GAZDZIAK
Editor

Many successful companies come from humble beginnings, but Williams Sausage may take the top prize in that department. Today, the company has topped \$100 million in sales and has enough steady growth to warrant a new expansion about every three years. With its flagship brand name, several regional brands and a thriving private-label business, the company has nationwide distribution for its sausage chubs, links and patties. Its line of breakfast sandwiches has grown so popular that it has greatly expanded its assembly and packaging departments in recent years. All of that success came from one sow.

The company's founder, Harold Lloyd Williams, had a meat background, working for a local packer after high school and as a meat cutter in the army during the Korean War. After he was discharged, he partnered with a regional processor called Partin Sausage to start a branch in Tennessee. After one year, he bought his partner out and became the owner in 1958. At the onset, it was a custom kill plant with a sausage line on the side. When Williams decided to expand the sausage business, he bought three sows.

"The first thing that happened is that one of them died, which was a big financial blow," relates Roger

Williams, Harold Lloyd's son and president of the business.

The second sow was processed into a batch of sausage, and he took that sausage and went door-to-door, cold-calling the local grocery stores in the area. Most stores already had a sausage brand for sale, so that first batch was given away as samples.

"In his mind, he still had that one sow left," Williams says. "He thought, 'I'll make a second batch next week and go back to all those grocery stores. If I sell that batch, then I'm in the sausage business. If they don't buy it, I'm in the custom kill business.'"

The fact that the company's name today is "Williams Sausage" and not "Williams Processing" should indicate how well he did. That second batch sold out, and Harold Lloyd Williams got into the sausage business.

Williams Sausage got its start in a tin building, built on his wife's family farm in Union City, Tenn. That building is long gone, replaced by a facility that was at last count 185,000 square feet in size. The most recent expansion was completed in 2011 and expanded the processing area, the cook line and the packaging department. The next expansion is already in the works and will add more packaging lines and 150 jobs.

"We probably add on every three

FACT BOX

Williams Sausage Co.

Union City, Tenn.

Founded: 1958

Products: sausage chubs, patties, links, breakfast sandwiches

Distribution: Nationwide with private-label and foodservice products; Williams brand sold in Kentucky, Tennessee and all neighboring states

Brothers Roger and David Williams represent the second generation of the family to run the business. Roger's oldest daughter, Lesley Anderson, and son-in-law Mark have joined the business as the third generation.

years," Williams says. "This is the same location; we've just renovated and added on constantly over 55 years."

The Williams family owns approximately 500 acres of land in the area, so finding space to expand is one problem the company does not have.

Breakfast of champions

Williams Sausage ended the custom kill business in 1972 when it became federally inspected. From then on,

From left to right: David Williams, Vice President; Roger Williams, President; Tommy Ray, Plant Manager



A recent expansion beefed up the packaging lines for Williams Sausage's sandwich assembly area.

the focus was on growing the sausage business. The company had at the time, a direct store delivery service with four routes. Now, it has its own line of delivery trucks and tractor trailers and has 39 DSD routes.

Everything that the company makes in its facility is related to sausage. The product line includes raw and fully cooked sausage patties and links, sausage chubs and breakfast sandwiches. The company also offers ham, bacon and smoked sausage, but those products are co-packed.

Williams Sausage's premium product is its whole-hog, pre-rigor sausage. The time it takes to kill the sow to when the meat is packaged is typically less than 45 minutes. The meat is still quite warm when it's packaged into chubs – upwards of 90 degrees – so the chubs are quick-chilled using a propylene glycol chiller.

“You're processing the pork before rigor mortis sets in, so the texture and taste is completely different from



something made out of pork trimmings, which is post-rigor,” Williams explains. “Getting it into the package quickly and freezing it quickly locks in all the juices and flavor to the product.”

Whole-hog sausage, as the name indicates, includes using primal cuts like hams, loins and shoulders, making the sausage a very lean product. Williams says that the company battles with not having enough fat in the hog to make a really good sausage.

“They've bred hogs to make them leaner, and that carries over to the sows

we kill,” he says. “We try to buy animals that are in the 550-pound range in weight, but they're hard to find.”

Some of Williams Sausage's growth has come from expanding into new sectors. For instance, it added on foodservice distributors and grocery wholesalers as customers and gained a nice bump in sales from doing so. Since adding on private label business, it has added customers like Kroger, WalMart,

Aldi's and HEB. Its sausage products are now distributed nationwide.

The company has also enjoyed accelerated growth after some successful business decisions. Over the last dozen years, Williams Sausage has acquired two regional processors that became available. In 2001, the company acquired Grogan's Sausage, a local competitor that previously had acquired the *Partin Sausage* brand that gave Harold Lloyd Williams his start. The *J.C. Potter* brand, acquired in 2011, is sold in Oklahoma, Arkan-

sas and Texas. Neither brand has the reach of the Williams flagship brand, but they sell well in their markets.

The company also has, for the last 15 years, brought in pork trimmings to make different grades of fully cooked sausage. The *Williams* brand remains the premium, whole-hog sausage, but other brands like its *Ole South* are value brands.

“When we did that, it opened up a whole new market for us,” Williams

says. “We still kill sows, but we use more meat from the outside than we do from sows we kill.”

A significant part of the company’s natural growth has come from its breakfast sandwiches. Roger Williams helped the company expand into that market when he joined the company, seeing the success that companies like Jimmy Dean and Tennessee Pride had. The initial product offering of a sausage and biscuit sandwich took



off, and the company now has 15 SKUs of breakfast sandwiches under its own brand, as well as private label sandwiches. Sausage, bacon, egg and cheese are among the ingredients served on biscuits and croissants.

The continued growth of the breakfast sandwiches is helping Williams Sausage expand its range. Currently, the *Williams* brand is sold from Illinois and Indiana down to Alabama and Mississippi.

“Every year, we take on a little more territory and are constantly working on expanding the *Williams*

Williams Sausage looks to phase out gestation crates

In order to make its premium whole-hog sausage, Williams Sausage slaughters about 1,600 sows per week. There are few farmers in the immediate vicinity of Union City who raise hogs, so the animals are brought in from North Carolina, Oklahoma, Iowa and Canada.

This January, the company announced that it was calling on its suppliers to discontinue the use of gestation crates within the next 10 years.

“We’re not big enough to sway the whole industry,” Williams says, “but I think what everyone is trying to do is try to make sure the animals we use are treated as humanely as possible.”

It was important to Williams that the announcement would give suppliers enough time to consider all alternatives to gestation crates and come up with the most humane method. A more immediate deadline, he notes, would create a financial burden on small family farmers.

“There are a lot of ideas out there {to replace gestation crates},” he says, “and it takes time to figure out what works for everybody.”



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