Hogs-head cheese, Italian sausage and a lot more

By SARAH SUE GOLDSMITH
Associate editor

Ask Mama how much salary she draws working here,” said Jimmy Migliacio Jr., leaning across the meat counter of the family grocery store in Plaquemine.

“That’s my donation to them,” said Mama Sarah Migliacio with a shrug and a smile.

“We helped them for 30 years; now they help us,” son Jimmy continued. “I used to get up in the morning and come here at 7 a.m. Worked until I went to school. I got out of school at 2:15 and came back and worked here till 7 p.m.” He was 13 or 14.

Now, instead of going to school, he drives a school bus, juggling his hours as he did when he was a kid so he can be in the store when he’s needed.

His father, Jimmy Migliacio Sr., is noted for his hogs-head cheese and Italian sausage. Jimmy Jr. raises the hogs for the store, about 40 of them. None of the porkers is destined to become ham. "I kill them and run them through the store. I use the whole hog," he said.

That’s a lot of Italian sausage.

What’s it like running the family business?

“It ain’t no picnic! We work long hours. One of us is always here.” When Jimmy Jr. is away from the store, brother Nicky runs the grocery. Nicky’s on the Iberville Parish Police Jury. Papa Migliacio ran the store until he officially retired in 1981. Unofficially, he still helps out and makes the hogs-head cheese.

And quietly in the background is Mama Migliacio, working the cash register with Elizabeth “Boo” Collins. Collins has worked with the family for 26 years. "I sell a lot of people come here for the hogs-head cheese and sausage," Collins said, "from Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and other places, especially for holidays."

She and Sarah Migliacio know most of the people who shop in the store. They are familiar with the families and sometimes the problems of their customers.

A jovial woman with curly white hair, dressed warmly in sweater and slacks, dashed through the line. “Ruby Blanchard is a regular customer,” Collins said.

"This is about the only place I shop," Blanchard said. "I’ve been coming here since 1969."

Sarah Migliacio has worked with her husband in the store for 38 years. Her parents owned the block the store sits on. "There used to be a drug store, a shoe shop, a bar and other stores," she said, "before the large grocery store was built."

She remembers the time a man’s brakes gave out in front of the store. "I was checking out somebody, and this man’s car came right through the glass window into the store," she said. That’s one of the most bizarre things she can recall happening at the store.

"Business is slower than it used to be," she said. Many of the store fronts along Railroad Avenue say “Closed.” "The furniture store went out of business," Sarah Migliacio said. "So did Wilbert’s drygoods store," added Collins. "There used to be a large soap store on Railroad Avenue."

The phone rings. Food is discussed. "We're a unique store, not like any others," Collins said. "We're the only store that sells Octagon soap."

"Business is slow and we're bad because of the economy," Jimmy Jr. said. It was pretty good when he took over in 1981, but it started dropping off in '82-'83. "We’re about 10-15 percent off," he said.

"I'm having it laminated," she said.

Though the store is modern, browsing along the aisles turns up things like Octagon soap, pig tails, turkey necks, sweet potato dough tarts and Cajun ginger fingers. Not all stores can boast that variety, along with standards and the hogs-head cheese and sausage. And, for turkey fryers, they sell 5-gallon buckets of hog lard.

"The prices have jumped during the past 20 or so years, but we carry the same items," Collins said. "We're about the only store that sells Octagon soap."

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