

Family business

By Joanne Cleaver, contributing editor

Her grandfather hoped she wouldn't follow in his footsteps, but Cara Nicoletti did anyway. "I had to fight my way back into the butcher shop," she says.

In the classic arc of the American dream, each generation hopes the next will have opportunities the elders didn't.

What happens when perpetuating an animal protein-based family business means pivoting to plant-based or hybrid offerings?

A few companies are finding out, as the youngest generations recenter their forbears' visions around a new generation of alternative proteins.

By the time Nicoletti was born, for example, her family's Boston-area butcher shop was being run by the third generation. Some of her earliest memories are of running errands for her grandfather in the butcher shop, which closed in 2002.

"He knew how to use all the parts of the animal," she says. The waste-not sensibility appealed to her, especially when it resulted in sausage. After a stint as a baker and a butchery apprenticeship, Nicoletti re-built her version of the business — what became Seemore Sausages — around locally sourced animal meats.

But 13 years ago, Nicoletti found herself pressed to maintain quality standards from capacity-constrained small suppliers. She realized that a new sausage formulation with vegetable and meat components would solve the ingredient supply conundrum and carve out a niche with consumers who wanted the fun of sausage with the virtues of a plant-based product.

It takes a steady hand to blend heritage and innovation, say family business consultants

I don't want any qualifiers. I want them to say, That's good food.

— even though that's exactly what multigenerational businesses have always done.

"Every business must adapt. It doesn't matter if you're Blockbuster or a mom-and-pop store," says Elle Hansen, managing partner of Regenerational Partners, an advisory firm.

"The tradition is of innovation," says Richa Singh, a consultant with the Family Business Consulting Group. "Tradition and innovation need not be opposing forces. Every entrepreneur, whether it's a family business or not, when they started it, they were doing something new."

Many organizations go through periodic resets, examining their fundamental mission and how that translates to action, whether re-engineering a chicken recipe around cultivated poultry or converting a product to a service.

For families, the reset tends to happen with generational transitions, as the up-and-comers recognize market trends and emerging consumer expectations that, almost by definition, elude their elders. Singh says that family businesses that manage relentless evolution do so by revisiting their purpose instead of fixating on a narrow definition of legacy.

"As soon as you move the focus from sticking to something to sticking to your purpose, you find it easier to respond to market demand," she says. "Everything becomes clear."

Nicoletti expanded on her family's longstanding goal of converting every scrap into sausage to include vegetables, creating a new product line in the process. Here's more about how she — and four others with a meat-based family history — merged heritage with innovation.



Joey Meloni with his father, Joe Meloni.



Shelly Van Cleve, daughter Monica Talbert.



German Master Butcher Karsten Schellhas.



Seymour Salett, Cara Nicoletti.

ANIMAL PROTEINS WERE THE ANCESTRAL TRADE, BUT **THESE ALT-MEAT INNOVATORS FIGURED OUT HOW TO WORK ANALOGUES** INTO THE PRODUCT LINE WITHOUT ROCKING THE FAMILY BOAT.



Jenny Goldfarb.



Meloni's plant-based chicken parm.



Van Cleve's Mind Blown shrimp skewers.



A spread of Nicoletti's sausages.