

Gas Station Gourmet

FAMILY TRADITION

Florida-based Lawhon's began as a family-owned butcher shop, evolving into a community-centric c-store.

BY AL HEBERT



At Lawhon's, the Belanger family maintain a tradition of great staff taking care of every customer like they're family.

Richard Lawhon opened his first grocery store in the Fort Myers, Florida, area in 1958. He hoped one day to own a second store, and he set his sights on a little place in North Fort Myers. It would be years before the particular store he wanted would come up for sale. In fact, it was 1976 — nearly 20 years later — that he finally bought it.

Lawhon, his wife, Libby, and their 18-year-old daughter, Laurine, opened the store as Lawhon's Grocery & Meat. Today, Laurine Lawhon Belanger, her husband, Larry, and her daughter, Teresa, carry on the family business in a rural store that's as fast-paced as its urban cousins.

Stumbling Into Foodservice

Lawhon's began as a family-owned butcher shop; foodservice arrived by accident. Laurine Belanger recalls, "One day, my dad was eating a sandwich. A

customer said, 'That looks good' and so we started serving food. The cheeseburger was also an accident. One of the girls made one for Dad, and then a customer asked if she would make him one too!" The rest is history.

"Ginger, the deli manager plans the recipes," Belanger said, adding that the grilled mac and cheese was an employee idea. Belanger feels creative freedom in the kitchen leads to good food. "I let them try new stuff. The girls can try whatever they want. If customers like it, we keep it."

Biscuits and gravy is a Southern tradition, so to expand their breakfast offer Lawhon's created a creamy sausage gravy that's become a morning favorite. "It's nothing

TEA BY THE GALLON

At Lawhon's, fountain drinks take a backseat to a southern favorite: sweet tea. "My rednecks love their sweet tea. It's what we grew up on. We sell 100 gallons a day and can hardly keep up with it," Belanger said. Making tea the old-fashioned way makes the difference. "We use six one-gallon-size tea bags, real sugar and make it in five-gallon containers. In our corner of the world they love sweet tea."





Every single person who walks through our door gives us our paycheck; customers are everything to us."

fancy," said Belanger, "just homemade sausage and gravy served over two biscuits. It's placed on a little flat tray and most guys sit in their work truck or eat off the hood of their car."

With no dining area at Lawhon's, customers either take meals home or gather outside to eat and visit. But don't equate the rural setting with low volume sales. The store goes through 30 pounds of sausage a day to keep up with customer demand. (Lawhon's offers 10 different meat packages that might include two pounds of its popular sausage, five pounds of ground chuck, along with six center cut pork chops, and so on. The cuts of fresh meat are bundled, making it easier on the meat cutters and easy for customers on the go.)

But, as retailers know, customers can be unpredictable. Case in point: biscuits. With a store full of fresh meat and food it makes sense that customers would like painstaking prepared homemade biscuits to smother in sausage gravy, right? Not so, said Belanger. "I tried homemade [biscuits] and customers wanted us to go back to the canned ones," Belanger admitted. "If something is wrong or something is bad, they tell us. ... Everything is fixable. I need to know everything: the good and bad."

Community Fixture

Before the interstate was built, Lawhon's customers would arrive at the store on horses and tractors. Business (and transportation) has grown a lot since then but Belanger still considers the store a country store.

Many factors lead to success in such a rural setting and a common element is often the store's role in the community. Rural convenience stores have an "our place" feel, and Lawhon's is no exception.

"We're the community meeting place," she explained, which she believes has a lot to do with the people working behind the counter. "I have great people working here. My girls shoot the bull with customers. And we have the 'liars club,' a group of guys who meet, eat and tell fishing stories at the meat counter."

Cultivating that community feeling was easier

when the names of customers were readily available on a credit card handed to a clerk or a check written at the register. It wouldn't take long for a name to be associated with a face. But that's all changed.

"I can tell you what [customers] eat and drink, but they slide the credit or debit

card and no one

writes a check," Belanger observed. She and her staff proactively ask customers their names and work on remembering them for the next visit.

The good service extends outside the store to the gas pumps; Lawhon's offers a full-service attendant. "The attendant pumps the gas for handicapped customers and handles any problems. My employee is there for whatever customers need; it's personal. I cannot stand impersonal; it's not who we are," Belanger said.

Belanger is positive about where credit for the store's success belongs. "Any successful business is successful because of the employees. I respect and appreciate all of them. They brought us to where we are today."

A lot has changed since Lawhon's early days when customers arrived on horses and tractors, but the passion for taking care of customers remains the same. The Belangers maintain a nearly century-old tradition of great people behind the counter taking care of every customer like family — and here, each customer is family. **NACS**



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Al Hebert is the Gas Station Gourmet and showcases America's culinary treasure — gas station cuisine. TV host Hebert shares these stories and on occasion, a recipe or two at **GasStationGourmet.com**. He is a regular **NACS Magazine** contributor, bringing food-service ideas to readers.