

SWERVE EATS + DRINKS *meet the maker*

a meaty empire

With a wealth of experience as a butcher, Walter von Rotz knows how to size up a side of beef. Now, his vision for Valbella Gourmet Foods includes taking it national. *by John Gilchrist*

Walter von Rotz likes to press the flesh, both literally and figuratively. As the president and head sausage maker of Valbella Gourmet Foods, he's responsible for transforming slabs of raw meat into double-smoked bacon, juicy hams, air-dried beef and link after link after link of sausage. With over 150 products in the Valbella stable, there's a lot of flesh to be pressed.

But the human kind of flesh pressing—interacting with the public—is something von Rotz misses these days. Instead of cutting and wrapping each order personally like he used to, he spends most of his time overseeing his 25,000-square-foot Valbella plant in Canmore's Elk Run Industrial Park. Now he has a crew of red-aproned staff to handle the constant stream of customers visiting his retail store.

Things were different when von Rotz and his wife Leonie opened their first store, Alpine Meats, in the late 1970s. Then, there was plenty of time to talk to customers for the simple reason that there weren't many shoppers. Alpine was the new kid and there was competition. Marra's Grocery had an active (and excellent) butcher shop, as did the "mine store" run by the coal-mining companies of that era. Von Rotz recalls that on his worst business day, the till rang up a scant \$39 in sales. But, undaunted, the Swiss sausage maker forged on, committed to a vision that would one day become Valbella.

Von Rotz entered a butcher's-apprentice program in Switzerland when he was just 15. Seven years later, with his meat-cutting papers—noting a specialization in sausage making—tucked into his pants, he set out for the New World and a butcher's job in Prince George, B.C. He loved the ruggedness of the terrain, and whenever possible he would travel around the Rockies.

One day he took a bus from Calgary to Banff and was smitten by the beauty of the Bow Valley around Canmore. The landscape was not the only thing that smote von Rotz on that trip. In Banff, he landed a job at the iconic Paris restaurant, where he met a young lady from Grindelwald who was also on a global adventure. Shortly afterwards, Leonie and Walter married and settled in Canmore.

Five years after opening Alpine Meats they moved their meaty mecca across the



Trans-Canada and renamed it Valbella, in honour of the "pretty valley" where they lived. Now, 27 years and five expansions later, Valbella products are sold in more than 150 restaurants and stores across Alberta.

Von Rotz is not contemplating retirement any time soon, though. In fact, he's thinking about going national. But in order to distribute across Canada he needs to have a specially built, federally inspected plant, which he might build on land he's procured near Calgary. He may also have some staff in mind to run it: his son Jeff is 26, schooled in hotel and restaurant management, and currently employed by a major meat company in Switzerland. His daughter Chantal, 23, works in the Canmore shop, and von Rotz makes no secret of his desire to see the next generation build on his accomplishments.

So von Rotz's new-world adventure continues. It's worked out well so far. And there's much more flesh to press. **S**

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WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S FLAVOUR
To create the smoky flavour found in many of Valbella's meats, von Rotz uses a combination of birch and spruce wood.. His double-smoked bacon stays in his smoker for a full two weeks to achieve its patent-leather-black rind.

PHOTO BY GRAHAM TWOMEY