

Grambel & Co. is not your everyday butcher

By Emily Mangini

The craft butchery Grambel & Co. opened at 810 Main Street with little flourish or fanfare in March, but that didn't stop chef-turned-butcher Ben Roberts, his local, grass-fed meats and an ever-changing rotation of housemade sausages and sauces from rattling the glass of butcher cases from Safeway to Whole Foods. Roberts' is the new face in town, but the esthetic he embraces definitely is Old School. The freshly carved sign above the Grambel & Co. doorway reads, "Ever since ever since."

Cryptic, yes, but is it humble? Obtuse? Noncommittal?

I set out to discover from Roberts himself what it means to be a craft butcher and what "ever since ever since" means to him.

"Truthfully, I didn't come up with the saying," he said.

"But what it means is that we are not re-creating the wheel. We're just going back to the old way of eating — you know, ever since ever since."

Roberts throws in a shoulder shrug to emphasize its simplicity. For Roberts, that old way of eating means sourcing all-natural, local and grass-grazed animals.

While he admits he dreams of driving a pickup from local farm to local farm, working directly with the farmers and animals, time is simply not on his side. Aside from being part owner, head butcher and chef at Grambel, Roberts also leads a community garden in Oakland.

Though he has no time to visit a truck farm, Roberts does partner with the next best thing: Marin Sun Farms, a Point Reyes-based operation that works directly with small, local farms that are committed to raising all-natural, grass-fed and pasture-raised animals.



Photo by Todd Parsons

Roberts does not stop at retailing local, sustainable cuts of steak, heritage pork, and goat. He also is a trained chef specializing in Italian cuisine. Roberts' culinary resume reads like a travelogue.

He is the former Executive Chef at San Francisco's Bar Bambino, from where he moved to cheffing in Mallorca, Barcelona and a small Italian village where he was known simply as "The American."

He draws on that exotic background and the artistry of many chefs to create a rotating list of housemade sauces, sausages and broths.

Sausages such as the spicy and earthy lamb merguez, or the disc-shaped French-style crepinettes, are rich, flavorful and have been elevating Bay Area barbecues throughout the summer.

Crowd favorite sauce suga de cognillo, made of braised rabbit, porcini mushrooms, pancetta simmered in white wine and sage, or the comfort food lamb ragu, have maintained popularity in the summer heat.

Roberts' creations can be a gateway to meats unfamiliar to the American palate, thanks to his creativity.

"At one point I was offering goat meat, but hardly anyone would buy it, it was just too unfamiliar. I turned it into a goat curry, and it flew off the shelves. Now, customers come in and ask when it will be available again."

Roberts is a self-described "natural naturalist" who grew up in Vermont and studied botany in college, a personal and educational background that fits with his new business.

"I grew up around farms, eating natural, 'artisanal' food before artisanal was even a thing. It was just the way things were. We didn't have big box stores."

If he can convey that history and that approach to the public through a meat business, he says he's happy.

"Recently one of my regulars came in and told me how the lamb sausage I had made for her family sparked a dinner table conversation with her children about the environment and health benefits of eating local, grass-grazed and sustainable meats.

"I love that. That's what this is all about."

With summer waning, trust Grambel & Co. to be on hand to help ease the transition to fall.

Food that is local and sustainable has an innate connection with nature, making seasonal transitions celebrations, not sad endings. The advent of fall and cooler months will give way to hearty stews, simmering sauces, and Thanksgiving turkeys, all curated and prepared by Roberts in the long-standing tradition, new to Redwood City, of 'ever since ever since.' **C**

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