



U.P. Summertime Comfort Food

By Cindy Paavola '84 BS

If there's a summer barbecue or picnic taking place in the Upper Peninsula, there's a good chance Vollwerth's hot dogs and brats are on the menu.

U.P. natives and those adopted to the region, such as Northern Michigan University students, faculty and staff, love the high-quality Vollwerth meat products. The 98-year-old family business located in Hancock produces about 75 items but is especially renowned for its natural casing hot dogs.

"It's that snap when you first bite into one that everyone brings up," says **Adam Manderfield '01 BS**, president of the Vollwerth and Baroni Company. "They love the natural casing." He adds that an element of Vollwerth's distinctive wiener taste is the infusion of hardwood smoke—no chemicals or liquid

smoke are used.

Summer hot dog sales make up a large portion of the company's yearly sales, according to Manderfield, although Vollwerth also does a brisk business during hunting season and around Christmas when people like to give gift packages to family and friends around the country. Along with hot dogs, some of Vollwerth's other best-selling products include venison, Cajun style, Andouille, summer and potato sausages; cheddarwurst; and ring bologna.

Manderfield

started working at the company as a teenager. Over the years, he moved up the administrative chain, serving in his current position for about a year. There are four other co-owners, including his twin brother, Jared, and his aunt **Mary Ann Vollwerth Seel '77 BS**, a fellow Wildcat.

"As a kid, I wasn't too thrilled about working at the family business, but by the time I was at NMU, I found myself often applying my courses to what we were doing here or could be doing here. That's when I knew I wanted to work here and make this company grow."

Manderfield says he still keeps a book given to him by business professor Bruce Sherony about the intricacies of operating a family business. His aunt echoes that balance is needed when working so closely with family members, but says the experience has

gone well more times than not.

"I had been away from the area for a long time when one day I got a call from my cousin saying, 'You need to come back and help us with the business.' So I did and it's been great. Sometimes working with family is challenging, but because we're small, we all end up wearing many hats to make sure things get done, and that helps us keep things in perspective. We're proud of what we do here," Seel says.

Adds Manderfield, "We produce about a million pounds of sausage per year. We use only quality ingredients—lean cuts of fresh beef and pork—and our recipes haven't changed in nearly 100 years. Someone who loved a Vollwerth hot dog as a kid bites into one today and it tastes the same as it did when they were five years old. People love that."

Visitors who try a Vollwerth weiner also usually end up liking it, says Manderfield. "They tell us it's hard to find a good hot dog."

The Vollwerth Company purchased another U.P. staple in 2008, when it bought the Baroni Company of Calumet, known for its spaghetti sauces and ravioli. Like its meat products, Vollwerth didn't change the name or recipes of the Baroni line.

Today, Vollwerth acts as the regional distributor for several other U.P. food products, including Trenary Toast and Crazy Joe's salsa. It is also trying to expand its reach throughout the Great Lakes region.

"The Pure Michigan (tourism) campaign has had a big impact on our success in placing product down-state," says Manderfield.

This is great news for regional NMU alumni for whom the perfect summertime meal wouldn't be complete without a Vollwerth's hot dog or brat on the grill. ■