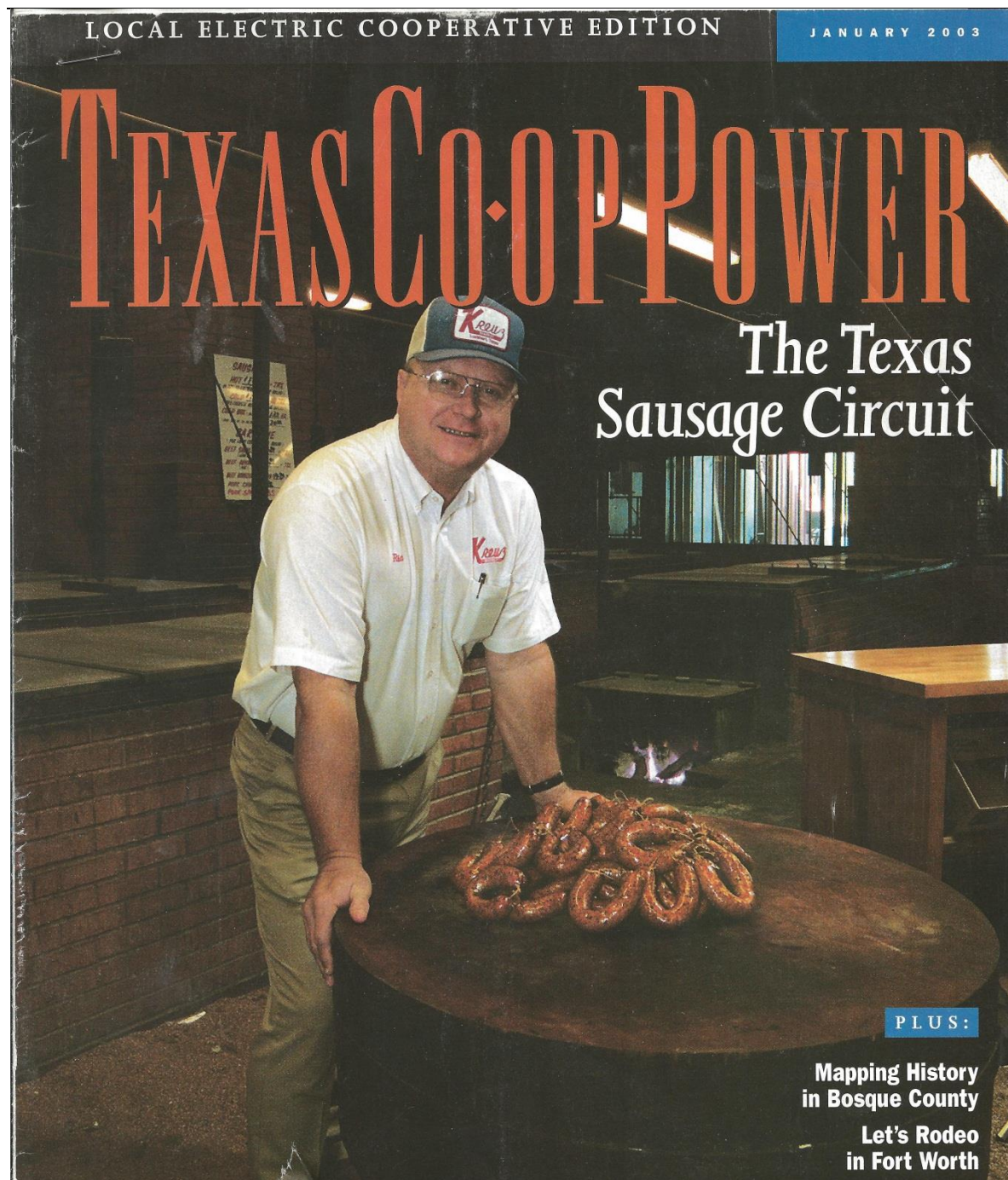


Erwin Theodore Zoch



## The Texas Sausage Circuit

*By Ellen Sweets, Photos by Geno Esponda*

Texans owe a debt of gratitude to the German, Central European, Italian and Acadian immigrants who established meat markets or at least brought their techniques here in the 19th century. They gave us one more thing to barbecue: down-home Texas sausage. Whether made with pork, beef, pork and beef, venison, sage, garlic, mustard and any number of other ingredients; whether large, small, hot, medium or mild links, rings, coils or smoked; an old-fashioned hot dog or a big, fat brat-Texas sausage is a thing of beauty.

As sausage became increasingly popular over the past century, large commercial operations cashed in on the sausage cachet, making sausage from less-appetizing pork and beef parts, mixing in additives such as water, cereal, vegetable starches, soy flour, preservatives and artificial coloring to make it more commercially viable. But to taste the real thing, you need to go to where the sausage is made, the small town meat markets.

Because we couldn't cover the entire state, we circled through Central Texas, which was settled by the Europeans who brought their sausage recipes across the Atlantic. Sausage aficionado Glenn Whitehead served as our native guide. He lives in a cozy cottage in Smithville, 40 miles southeast of Austin on State Highway 71.

"Living here in Smithville, where I have access to Czech, German and Polish sausage, I like to think I approach sausage from a historical point of view," he says. "But I know that a lot of my interest in and love of sausage comes from my boyhood. My grandfather would buy a whole hog, take it to the butcher and just say 'make me some sausage.' It was coarse, spicy and vinegary. That much I remember. And I know that has something to do with why I love it so much now."

Whitehead, a landscape painter, will go as far as necessary to sample a new sausage. But to satisfy his craving, he needn't go far. In fact, he only has to go around the corner.

Donna Zimmerhanzel owns and operates Smithville Food Lockers at the intersection of Loop 230 and State Highway 95. They do custom processing and make their own sausage. As we found with many of the best sausages, you must go to the shop to buy it. It is not commercially distributed. Donna's recipe has been in the family since her father-in-law bought the facility in 1965. In addition to curing ham, bacon and sausage, they'll make Cajun boudin, a pork and rice sausage, upon request. They even built equipment to their own specifications. Their sausage has a fresh, full-bodied, smoky taste.

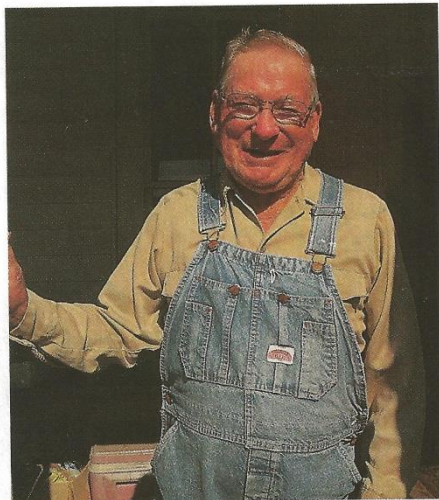
Great sausage-makers like the Zimmerhanzels take pride in using only quality cuts of meat for their product while keeping additives and preservatives to a minimum. They guard their recipes as fiercely as any chili cook or pig-roasting pitmaster. Top-tier sausage making involves not only choice meat but also a savory blend of spices and condiments ranging from coriander to nutmeg, cloves, garlic, vinegar, mace, pepper, chili pepper-even pistachio nuts.

Whitehead cruised Central Texas picking up samples, which he grilled for us one warm Sunday. (He actually recommends steam rather than grilling sausage, but this was a day to grill outdoors.) We cleansed our palates with homemade slaw and accentuated the experience with onions, peppers, spicy beans and sauces from some of the meat markets.

Among those we sampled were the Zimmerhanzels' sausage and another area favorite, Meyer's Elgin Smokehouse Sausage (188 U.S. Highway 290). Elgin Smokehouse Sausage is still made the way Rudolf Meyer first prepared small batches for customers in 1915. His father, Henry, brought the recipe with him when he emigrated from Germany.

Other Elgin sausages include Elgin Hot Sausage from Southside Market (1212 U.S. Highway 290 West) and Crosstown BBQ's own links (202 South Avenue C). Brands of Elgin sausages are available at HEB, Wal-Mart Supercenters, Albertson's, Randalls, Fiesta Mart, Super S Foods and several independent grocers in Texas. Talk about an impact: The city of Elgin uses sausage as part of its municipal logo.

We tasted other area sausages that have a very limited distribution. Eureste's in Waelder sells its homemade product, a rather juicy sausage, only at its store. V&V in Cistern, a hamlet on State Highway 95 between Smithville and Waelder, makes its own, too, with a touch of soy flour, hydrolyzed vegetable protein and MSG.



Sausage-maker Erwin Zoch of Winchester.

Glenn Whitehead

Burton's, east of Elgin on U.S. Highway 290 West, makes a tasty all-pork sausage. It's a little drier than some of the others, with a denser texture. Eckerman's, on Route 2 in the tiny Austin County settlement of New Ulm, makes a moist beef and pork blend with a respectable infusion of black pepper.

During two road trips, we valiantly ate our way through Cooper's in Round Rock, City Market in Luling, Ray Lopez' Gonzales Food Market in Gonzales, plus Louie Mueller's and Mikeska's in Taylor.

The highlight of our second trip was Kreuz (pronounced "krites") Market, a Lockhart landmark since 1900. Originally a grocery store and meat market, it evolved into a barbecue restaurant. Edgar "Smitty" Schmidt went to work at the

market in the 1930s. The Kreuzes sold him the establishment in 1948. The property on South Congress Street kept the Kreuz name until Schmidt's children decided to go their separate ways in 1999. Nina Sells now operates Smitty's Market in the original location. Rick Schmidt, who is also the chairman of the board of directors of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, kept the venerable "Kreuz Market" name and moved to a red brick and tin building at 619 North Colorado Street. Kreuz sausage, a blend of beef and pork, is still made by hand, and the painstaking process is well worth the effort.

"Yes, we buy the raw material, season it in bulk, grind, mix and hand-tie it," Schmidt says. "And we still do business pretty much the same way we always did. We don't sell retail in grocery stores or anything like that-although you can order from our web site." (To get Kreuz sausage, you can fax an order to [512] 376-5576, e-mail a request to [kreuzmarket@...](mailto:kreuzmarket@...), or shop online at [www.kreuzmarket.com](http://www.kreuzmarket.com).)

Kreuz still serves its barbecue the traditional way-on butcher paper. Upon request, you can get a hunk of onion, a chunk of cheese, some pickles and some peppers. If you want barbecue sauce, you'd better

bring it yourself. "We like the flavor of our meat. When it's been cooked right with the right seasoning in the right wood, you don't need sauce," Schmidt said. "We've always said we have nothing to hide."

Robb Walsh, author of *Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook* (Chronicle Books, 1-800-722-6657), explains the history of Texas meat markets' spare approach to accompaniments: "Itinerant farm workers who came through town during the harvest bought the smoked meats at the butcher's shop and ate them on the spot. Side dishes were what they could find on the store's shelves-usually just crackers and pickles. Thus began the meat market barbecue tradition."

Some great sausage-makers are virtually off the map. Take 79-year-old Erwin Zoch of Winchester (about eight miles east of Smithville), who has been making sausage since he was old enough to chop pork. Using a recipe handed down from his Wendish grandfather, who left Germany in the 1880s with the rest of his family, Zoch uses mostly pork. He prepares his links in a shed next door to the house where he was born, a house that he shared with his wife until her death in 1985.

"My mother took a lot of pride in knowing how to do things," he says, "and she especially took pride in her sausage. It's all in knowing the right balance between your salt, black pepper, garlic powder, chili powder, onion powder and red pepper." He butchers his pigs and makes sausage in the winter. "When I eat it, I steam it and eat it with a little sauce. Sauce accentuates the smoky flavor," he says. Never poke a fork in his sausage while cooking it, he warns, some of the juices will be lost.

Zoch has passed on his technique in the hope that his sons and daughters will keep the tradition alive.

"I might not be around for much longer, but sausage will," he says. "There will always be people who make their own. That's the best kind."

*Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, Pedernales Electric Cooperative, San Bernard Electric Cooperative and Guadalupe Valley Electric Cooperative serve areas mentioned in this article.*

*Contributor Ellen Sweets recently moved to Denver, Colorado, to work for the Denver Post.*