

Writer: Genevieve Barlow

IN GERMANY, they're known as fleischmeisters, masters who learn and practise traditional methods of curing and preserving meat.

Their professional oath commits them to looking after the welfare of animal and customer, and to uphold traditional methods.

The wall of German-born Ralf Fink's new Oakwood Smallgoods Co shop in Castlemaine, in central Victoria, attests to his experience. On it hang fleischmeister certificates awarded to him in Germany in 1987 and his father Otto before him in 1960.

OAKWOOD SMALLGOODS CO



Ralf Fink runs Oakwood Smallgoods Co at Castlemaine.

Picture: Andy Rogers



Ralf Fink is a fleischmeister - master of traditional German meat curing. He runs Oakwood Smallgoods butcher and charcuterie shop at Castlemaine, where he also runs workshops for butchers and farmers.

Picture: Andy Rogers



Ralf and his wife, Raksorn, in their Oakwood Smallgoods butcher and charcuterie shop at Castlemaine.

Picture: Andy Rogers

Ralf with meat that is seasoned and curing. He buys meat from local farmers including McIvor Farm, Warialda Belted Galloways and Everything Wagyu and makes traditional smallgoods including Weisswurst, Frankfurts, Debrecener (spiced Hungarian sausage), prosciutto and Blutwurst (blood sausages).

“To get this degree I had to study and work for eight years,” Ralf says. “That includes three years in an apprenticeship and five years in the trade. You learn about slaughtering, cutting, sausage making, dry curing, how to make pates and about running a retail business.”

Ralf grew up in the meat trade. At the age of 23, he took over his father’s butchery in Iserlohn, in northwest Germany, and ran it for 15 years. For the past 12 years, he has practised his trade in Australia, boosting the fortunes of other butchers, meat businesses and training companies that he has worked for.

In February he backed himself and opened his own showcase shop in an artisan food makers centre called The Mill. The former carpet mill and its industrial surrounds were bought by a local farmer and doctor and are being converted to a hip centre for small businesses. There’s a brewery, wine, ice-cream, cake maker and bakery, plus an organic food outlet and an Austrian-style kaffeehaus.



Certifiably delicious: Ralf Fink’s fleischmeisters certificates hang on the wall of his Oakwood Smallgoods butcher and charcuterie shop at Castlemaine. Ralf buys meat from local farmers including McIvor Farm, Warialda belted Galloways and Everything wagyu. Picture: Andy Rogers

Ralf’s smallgoods shop and training centre suits the setting. Outside his shop, people can sit and sample his wursts in buns and croissants with mustard after they’ve rambled through the eclectic vintage bazaar nearby.

Inside the shop, which Ralf runs with his wife, Raksorn Onlum, people can take part in classes to learn how to smoke, cook or cure meats and about the temperatures and ingredients vital to the process. He hopes to attract

farmers, home and commercial butchers and delicatessen owners to the workshops — anyone with a passion for making their own food.

Through viewing windows to the maturing and pickling rooms, buyers can also see smallgoods in the making — hams curing, sausages pickling and others hanging in plastic bags of salty brine.

“I designed it so that everything is visible,” Ralf says. “I want nothing to be hidden.”

Ralf’s new venture is likely to be a boon for Victorian butchers and small-scale farmers alike. He has years of experience in traditional methods and wants to train others so the processes are not forgotten.

Horsham butcher Brendan Lang is Ralf’s first professional trainee; and he uses pork from grass-grazed free-range pigs reared by Jason and Belinda Hagan of McIvor Farm at Tooborac. He chose to source their pork after visiting the farm and wants to buy similarly-farmed lamb and beef.



Ralf Fink with his wife, Raksorn, assistant manager Matthew Axon and Horshap butcher Brendan Lang.

Beyond the display cabinets, a corridor between a fresh meat hold and a curing and maturing room leads to two gas-fuelled sous vide baths and two wood-fired brick smokehouses, where Ralf can smoke up to 100 hams a day, allowing longer than the conventional 12 hours of cooking and smoking. He designed them himself and the tar-seasoned smokehouse walls are impervious and washable.

His product cabinet is a feast of Weisswurst, Frankfurts, Debrecener (spiced Hungarian sausage), prosciutto and Blutwurst (blood sausages), all named after their geographic regions of origin.

Ralf's years in Australia have taught him that Australians call anything longer than a sausage kabana and that our meat is naturally saltier than he was used to in Germany. He reckons it's the best in the world, thanks to strong quarantine measures.

"My biggest aim is to teach people the old, traditional methods of pickling and curing and smoking," he says. "Then I can happily say I left a little footprint in Australia."

To find out more, visit oakwoodsmallgoods.com