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Let's Eat: Jimbooo's Italian Style Beef

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By Carrie Napoleon Correspondent

When James Lungaro pushed his first hot dog cart around Carbondale in 1983, little did he know how his business would grow.

From that first cart came Jimbooo's Ltd., a sandwich shop offering far more than the career-starting hot dog. He also began a catering business under the same name.

In February, Lungaro launched his own line of Italian beef packaged for grocery stores, Jimbooo's Italian Style Beef.

"When I turned 20 years old, my grandmother loaned me \$1,500, and I bought the push cart," Lungaro recalled.

Now carts of his product are still being pushed around, but this time they are in grocery carts.

After successfully peddling the dogs in the southern Illinois city, Lungaro returned to his native South Holland to set up a more permanent shop.

He began selling his hot dogs at a local gas station. He then moved into White's Pit Stop next to Walt's Food Center in the village, where he stayed until the grocery store decided to tear down the space he was renting to accommodate expansion.

It was the demolition of that building that opened lines of communication between Lungaro and the people at Walt's in a way that would change his business.

"I had been thinking about putting a private label on my beef for many years," Lungaro said. With support from the people at Walt's, that became a reality.

Jimbooo's was well known at Walt's, Ron Borne, meat buyer supervisor for the grocery chain, said. The retailer had used his catering business and was aware of his reputation in the Southland.

"He began working with one of our buyers for almost a year getting the product off the ground," Borne said.

Together, they cut through the miles of red tape, labeling requirements and USDA approvals to get Lungaro's Italian beef ready for the supermarket. On Feb. 18, Walt's put the first package of Jimbooo's Italian Style Beef on its shelves.

"It's taken off fantastic," Borne said, adding the response has been better than he anticipated.

The Italian beef market is highly competitive. Along with a variety of other frozen product vendors, many grocers slice fresh Italian beef in their delis.

However, Jimbooo's has held its own. "Right now it's outselling our Papa Charlie's line," Borne said.

Lungaro said his manufacturer told him to expect to sell about 30 cases a week when first starting, a good number, he was told, for a new product of this nature. Since launching in February, Lungaro said he is moving about 180 cases a week.

Jimbooo's can be found in all the Walt's Food Centers, Wiseway, Fairway, Village Farm Stand and a variety of independent grocery stores throughout the Southland.

This week, he inked a deal to bring his Italian beef into the Strack and Van Til chain, including it's Ultra locations. The account, Lungaro said, will be his largest.

Borne said a key reason Lungaro is doing so well is his commitment to his product. He routinely demos the product in different Walt's locations, giving out samples.

"It's one of the best new products we have introduced in many years," Borne said.

Lungaro, who usually deals only with fresh beef, decided to go with the frozen product simply because there was no waste.

"It's the same brand, the same quality. It's just fresh frozen," Lungaro said.

Jimbooo's Italian Style Beef is available in a 10-ounce size for around \$6. A 26-ounce tub is also available.

Lungaro is pondering adding other products -- such as bratwurst or meatballs -- to his frozen food line, but he intends to crawl first before he runs.

"The potential is there for anything to happen," he said.