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## Ma Baensch's Tasty Herring

### Riverwest specialty adds flavor to any occasion

By Sarah Biondich



Kim Wall

Ma Baensch Food Products has stood at the intersection of Locust Street and Humboldt Avenue since 1945, gathering years as one of Riverwest's oldest businesses. Whether visitors to the annual Locust Street Festival in June see Ma Baensch's red brick building complete with electric blue trim as a starting point or the finish line to the celebration, tasting a sample of herring has become a yearly tradition for many in the neighborhood.

Lena "Ma" Baensch founded her company in 1932 after it became clear among friends, family and neighbors

that her secret recipe for prepared herring was special. Lena asked local grocers to sell her jarred herring and a thriving business was born. In 1999, Kim Wall, owner and president of SunWild Foods Inc., purchased Ma Baensch Food Products Co. from the family. At the helm of the venerable enterprise, Wall quickly improved operating efficiencies, enhanced the quality of the product, extended geographic distribution and tightened the purse strings. She streamlined Ma Baensch's appearance by modifying the artwork on the jar and adding a gold lid. Wall also received kosher certification through the Chicago Rabbinical Council and repositioned Ma Baensch herring products from the dairy section to the meat and seafood section of grocery stores. There are some things, however, that Wall did not change: Ma's recipes.

Ma Baensch imports North Atlantic Grade A herring tidbits from Nova Scotia through a family-owned fishery that conducts American business exclusively with Wall. Comeau's Sea Foods owns and operates three herring seiners and uses cooling equipment to fast chill its catch. The catch is then brought to land in refrigerated seawater and undergoes processing that same day. The herring is skinned, trimmed, filleted and packed in barrels with a German brine made specifically for Baensch Food Products.

Once at the Locust Street plant, the barrels are sorted one at a time. Only the firmest pieces of fish are collected in a stainless steel tank, where they are rinsed in fresh, bubbling, cold water. When the water runs clear, the herring is drained and then marinated for 24 hours in Lena's secret wine sauce. After marinating, the fish is drained again and hand packed into jars and filled with fresh cream or wine sauce. Wall contends that her herring is better than that of her competitors because of the stellar quality of the ingredients she uses. For example, she marinates her herring with liquid beet sugar, rather than the more common corn syrup. Instead of using a sour cream that has been quickened with citric acid, Wall uses all-natural Golden Guernsey sour cream. Any onions used in the herring are Spanish onions that have not been refrigerated and are sliced fresh each day.

In the past, herring was a special treat to be enjoyed over the Christmas and New Year holidays. But dietary trends are in favor of foods rich in protein and omega-3 fatty acids, oils thought to have cardiovascular benefits and improve brain health. Herring is naturally rich in protein and calcium and has more omega-3s than trout, salmon and tuna. Herring has outgrown its role as the go-to appetizer for special occasions and has become a popular easy-to-serve snack for any occasion, any time of year.

1025 E. Locust St. Call (414) 562-4643 or go to [www.mabaensch.com](http://www.mabaensch.com).

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