



# THE SULTAN OF SAUSAGE

BOB EVANS AND COLONEL SANDERS WALKED INTO A BAR. NO REALLY, THEY DID

BY RICH WARREN



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HIS NAME'S ON THE DOOR: JEWELL AND BOB EVANS INSIDE THE FIRST RESTAURANT

An awful lot of people seem to think that Bob Evans has passed on to the great sausage factory in the sky. A state trooper who once stopped him for speeding looked at his license and said, "You can't be Bob Evans. Bob Evans is dead."

Another time, a waitress at a Bob Evans Restaurant in Grand Rapids, when told she was speaking to the company's founder, replied, "Oh yes. And I'm Marilyn Monroe."

No one laughs louder at these stories than Bob Evans himself. In fact, hearty guffaws erupt spontaneously from Ohio's Sultan of Sausage, who was very much alive one sunny autumn morning and trying to enjoy a quiet breakfast with his wife of 62 years, Jewell, at the original Bob Evans Restaurant in Rio Grande. But a quiet breakfast is a tall order here, where a steady stream of local well-wishers walks up to swap stories and greetings.

"How many summers have you seen now, Mr. Evans?" asks one of them, a farmer in bib overalls. Bob and he merrily converse, Bob not minding at all being asked his age, which is 84, and not holding back on sharing his opinions, which are many. Just this morning he phoned the Columbus headquarters of Bob Evans Farms, with which he's no longer associated, and urged them to serve fresher tomatoes in the restaurants. After all, with his name still on 500 restaurants in 22 states, he feels a bit responsible for the quality of the food.

This morning he's savoring a "Sunshine Skillet," a concoction of eggs, sausage, potatoes and gravy. "Breakfasts are what Bob Evans does best," he confides. "Ask Jewell. She's got the tastebuds."

I've met Bob and Jewell in this place so much a part of their past to hear their reminiscing and talk with Bob about his current passions. Arranging our meeting over the phone, the notoriously lead-footed Mr. Evans cautioned me about every speed trap between Columbus and Rio Grande. "Beware Jackson County," he warns. "They're laying for you there."

Now that I've arrived, I'm charmed by the Evanses, who are as folksy and down-to-earth as you might expect. And I'm shocked that the company's namesake is—by far—the last one at our table to receive his meal.

But that doesn't seem to bother Bob, from whom stories bubble in a steady stream. My personal favorite begins like a bad joke: Bob Evans and Colonel Sanders walked into a bar. No really, they did—back when the Colonel and Bob would take long rides through southern Ohio and Kentucky. On this occasion, they entered a restaurant/bar in Ironton, where the feisty Colonel was far from satisfied with his meal, loudly complaining first to the waitress and then to the manager, who had a bit of an attitude. Before Bob knew it, the Colonel threw a punch, and a fight was underway.

"I'm amazed we got out of there without being killed," remembers Bob, who had to pull the Colonel off the manager. "It was a very rough place."

Memories of Bob and Jewell's early years together are more homespun. He loves to recall the days when he was experimenting with his sausage recipe and letting Jewell weigh in with her famous tastebuds. When he began mixing in hams and tenderloins,

truckers drove for miles to feast at a little 12-stool diner Bob opened in nearby Gallipolis, a place where Bob preferred to serve steak but where everyone started clamoring for sausage.

Before long, Bob was personally peddling the sausage in Ohio towns far and wide. When he started crossing the river into West Virginia, he got a nasty note from the government reminding him of restrictions to interstate food sales. Bob wrote back, in pencil on yellow legal paper, stating it was his understanding farmers could legally transport up to 12 hogs across state lines. Nevermind that these particular hogs were already ground into sausage.

Throughout the '50s, demand kept growing, so Bob constructed a sausage plant on his farm near Rio Grande. In the '60s, the famous "Down on the Farm" TV commercials began, with Bob appearing in a Stetson hat and bolo tie, standing outside their 1820s farmhouse they called the Homestead. So many people started beating a path to the farm that Bob put up a sausage shop so they could have a bite to eat and chat with the sausage-maker himself. That shop evolved into the restaurant where we're eating today.

On weekends, dozens of people would find their way to the house, which still stands next door, and where the amiable Evanses had trouble turning them away. Once, when the family was standing around a piano singing, someone opened their back door and yelled in, "Are you still serving?" Another time, they returned home to find several people sitting at their table, waiting to be fed. When politely reminded they were inside a family home, the "guests" remarked, "Well, your commercials say 'You're always welcome at the Homestead.'"

Of the years his company experienced explosive growth, Bob has less to say. He long ago handed over day-to-day operations to other family members, preferring to serve as a passionate spokesman for the company.

He retired in 1986, and his cousin Dan Evans took over as CEO for the burgeoning business. A front-page story in the *Wall Street Journal* detailed the disagreements between

the two cousins on how the business was being run and even mentioned Bob's disapproval of the current state of sausage, a subject he dodges today, stating only, "Well, it still sells."

Cousin Dan retired in 2000, and now no Evans family members are involved in Bob Evans Farms. Bob remains a major stockholder, however, and his attendance two years ago at the stockholders' annual meeting made headlines when Bob supported several controversial motions to reshape the company, including its outright sale. It's not a subject the Evanses like to talk about. "It got a little ouchy" is all Jewell will say as Bob chats with other folks as he moves toward the door.

Nowadays, Bob's biggest passion, for which he crusades as ardently as he once did for his sausage, is something called year-round grazing. "It will save the family farm!" he proclaims repeatedly, as he describes a system of planting cold-weather grasses on which cattle can graze even during the winter, thus reducing the high cost of stored feed.

Bob's experimenting with the process at his nearby 3,500-acre ranch and hands me thick agricultural treatises on grasses with colorful names like fescue and triticale. What sticks with me is an image of his cattle consuming turnips. Apparently, the cows love turnips, literally inhaling them, foliage and all, like children with bad table manners inhaling strings of spaghetti.

After our chat, Bob and Jewell take me for a photo op to their palatial home atop a hill outside Gallipolis, where Jewell neighborly offers to cook me something, even though we've just eaten. With their income, the Evanses could live anywhere but choose to live unostentatiously amongst the Gallia County neighbors they've always known. Still, their fondest memories are of those rustic years at the Homestead. For the Evans family, no matter where they live, home will always be down on the farm. ☺

VISITORS ARE STILL WELCOMED to the original Bob Evans Farm and Homestead. Click to [bobevans.com](http://bobevans.com) for info.