150ish is a free weekly newsletter that brings you all the dish on local food artisans working within 150 miles—more or less—of New York City.

About Us

The largest smokehouse in the country lives in Brooklyn

So stock up for the holidays at Acme's Fish Fridays

November 28, 2013 | Photo courtesy Lena Pardo

Gobble Tov everyone! While many are planning their trips to
We love to share our passion about great local resources with our friends and families—and 150ish is our way to share that passion with everyone. Each week we feature a food product from our 150ish area: we buy the products, we taste the products, and we only tell you about what we like.

From the latest entrepreneurial food incubators to the unsung classics we’ve loved for generations, we bring you the best of the boroughs, the tri-state area, and beyond-ish.

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The mall for all those Black Friday specials, 150ish has discovered the best Friday bargain of them all—Fish Friday at Acme Smoked Fish in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Each week the smokehouse opens its doors to the public for six hours of retail shopping at wholesale prices. A few weeks ago, Francesca and Marisa suited up with hairnets, gloves, and rubber boots, and covered our clothes with paper robes usually found in the doctor’s office (notice we didn’t post that picture on Facebook) to take a behind-the-scenes tour of this fourth-generation business that’s been a force on Gem Street since 1954.

Here’s the dish. You might have to check a few different doors before you find the public entrance to Acme Smoked Fish, a block-long, low-rise brick building that sits just off the Brooklyn-Queens waterfront. But once inside, the place is bustling. “We used to get about 30 people over the course of the day,” Adam Caslow says of the company’s Fish Fridays. “Now we need six people to service customers—I’ll even come down to work the line if it gets especially crowded.” All manner of smoked fish enthusiasts wait patiently on the line, from Caribbean grandmothers to Orthodox men. It might not be glamorous, but it’s a friendly gathering of those who share a love of good lox. Buying direct not only means ridiculously low prices, but also access to the full line of Acme products, including new and specialty items. “That’s the really great thing about Fish Friday,” Adam says. “You get to taste everything.”

Adam and his cousin David are the fourth generation to work at this family-owned and operated concern. Their great-grandfather Harry Brownstein emigrated from Russia in 1905, settling in Brooklyn, which at the time was home to dozens of smokehouses. Harry would buy smoked fish from all of them and distribute it via horse-drawn carriage to appetizing stores throughout the city. In 1937, he formed his own smoked fish company in Brownsville and in 1954, opened the plant in Greenpoint with his sons, Joe and Morty. Harry called the company Acme not only because it meant “the best,” but also to be listed first in the phone book.

The 1970s brought Harry’s grandsons, Robert and Eric Caslow, into the business (their father, Rubin Caslow, a fish salesman, married Harry’s daughter Charlotte, who was the company bookkeeper, and joined the family firm). David Caslow (Eric’s son) came to Acme in the 1990s, and Adam Caslow (Robert’s son), joined the company in 2006.

Today there are few smokehouses left in Brooklyn, but Acme is the largest one in the entire country—and it truly lives up to its name: you’ll find their fish behind the counter at Zabar’s and other upscale markets around the city, beneath
the private labels of some of the city’s most famous gourmet groceries, and across the country at retailers like ShopRite and Costco. Whether you’re buying it fresh or packaged, chances are good that your favorite smoked fish comes from Acme.

As one might expect from a kosher concern (there is a rabbi on site), Francesca and Marisa found a spotless facility with only the slightest hint of smoky aroma in the air. Sturgeon, the only non-kosher fish they sell, is prepared in a separate area. “Food safety is everything to us. It drives all our decisions,” Adam says.

The company retails its fish products under four brand names: Acme is the traditional lox and nova, including such specialty cures as pastrami nova; Blue Hill Bay is all-natural and includes the widest range of products, from smoked salmon and other fish to fish salads, herring, and other specialties like marinated salmon in wine; Ruby Bay (named for Adam’s grandfather Reuben) is the company’s newest line, geared toward a younger, hipper customer: smaller servings and lower price points combine with innovative flavors—like the delicious salmon jerky they introduced last year. Their purchase of Florida’s Great American Smoked Fish Company in 2007 brought that brand into the fold as well. In addition to providing smoked fish to the food service industry, this facility serves up regional specialties like smoked mahi mahi and a smoked fish dip made from mahi mahi and wahoo.

Watching carts full of gorgeous salmon fill the smoking rooms and hearing from Adam that the company smokes 100,000 pounds of fish on an average week, it naturally leads to a conversation about sourcing and sustainability. “Obviously it’s a hot-button issue, and one that we take very seriously,” Adam says. “And we only buy from those who take their environmental responsibility as seriously as we do.” All of the brands use both wild and farmed fish from a carefully curated global supply chain: three species of wild Alaskan salmon, as well as salmon from Scotland, Norway, and Chile; whitefish from the Great Lakes; herring from the North Atlantic; blue fish from the Long Island Sound; and trout from Spain. Their sable is made from Alaskan black cod.

Most interestingly, in 2012 Acme formed an exclusive partnership with Verlasso, a producer of Chilean farmed salmon that is the first ocean-farmed salmon to receive a spot on the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch “eco-friendly” fish list. “The world needs aquaculture to provide protein,” Adam says. “But we need to find methods that don’t do more harm than good.” Verlasso fish is “harmoniously raised” to protect ocean diversity and vastly reduces the
number of feeder fish needed per pound of salmon without compromising healthy levels of omega-3s.

Steeped in tradition, Acme is also clearly a company with its eye on the future, much like the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood that surrounds it. “There are so many food businesses here now, and a lot of them look to us as the gold standard,” Adam says. “The neighborhood has blown up, but I would say that at least 60 percent of our employees walk to work.” Acme provides about 160 local jobs and another 30 in the Florida facility.

We asked Adam how often smoked fish found its way onto the family table and he laughed: “One year we served chicken instead of fish to break the Yom Kipper fast and it caused a real uproar. Like everyone else, we eat it in moderation, but let’s just say we do brunch really well.”

**Acme Smoked Fish**

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*Fish Fridays take place at the smokehouse every Friday from 8:00 AM to 1:00 PM. CASH ONLY. Arrive early, as the line can get very long—especially during the high holidays and in December.*