EAT AND DRINK

Acme Smoked Fish in Greenpoint is NYC’s best-kept not-so-secret seafood destination

The lines will be especially long for the High Holidays.

In 1905, Harry Brownstein emigrated from Russia and settled in Brooklyn. He started distributing smoked fish purchased from local smokehouses and a staple in the Brooklyn community was born. (Credit: David Handschuh)

By David Handschuh
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On a recent Friday morning, Seth Haberman pedaled from his Upper West Side home to Greenpoint to take advantage of New York’s best unkept secret in noshing.

Outside of Acme Smoked Fish on Gem Street, he was arranging his $200 haul on his bike for the ride back to Manhattan: a pound and a half of sable, two pounds of David Burke pastrami smoked salmon, two pounds of lemon pepper smoked salmon, half a pound of Nova, a pound of hot smoked salmon, four pounds of cold smoked and hot smoked tuna, and two tubs of whitefish salad.
“It’s like the answer to the question ‘What do hipsters, Hasidim and Koreans have in common?’ Fish Friday,” says Haberman, 58, before taking off toward the Williamsburg Bridge with his bags balanced on the back of his bike.

A Friday tradition

Fish Friday became a tradition in the early 1980s at the fourth-generation family-run fish factory, located on Gem Street near Meserole Avenue since 1954.

People would come in to the wholesale operation “at every hour of the night and day and ask to buy a whitefish,” according to Richard Schiff, vice president of Northeast sales for Acme.

“Workers would tell them, ‘Come back on Friday,’ and it became a thing where every Friday, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., we would offer herring, whitefish or sable,” Schiff says. “We now have seven to 12 people working behind the counter all day on Friday and a line out the door and down the street to get a taste of what Acme has to offer.”

In addition to the staples like cold smoked salmon, gravlax, sable, pastrami smoked salmon, kippered salmon, whitefish and packaged varieties of smoked fish, there are also Fish Friday specials which vary from week to week.
Customers come to the cash-only market for these offerings, as well as the substantial savings off the retail price of smoked fish.

A man who gave his name only as Moishe has been coming to Fish Friday every week for 25 years from his home in Brighton Beach. He was snacking on smoked salmon trimmings ($4 a pound), which will become a salmon salad when he gets home, as he was placing his order.

Lori Oppenheimer and her husband Peter, come from Great Neck, Long Island, for Fish Friday three or four times a year.

“It’s a wonderful experience if you don’t mind the fish smell,” Lori says with a smile. “We came here for the selection of various kinds of smoked salmon and the taste experience. Whatever you buy you can ask for a taste.”

The Oppenheimers come prepared.

“I have my list, and we change it from time to time,” Lori says. “Gravlax, Scottish salmon, today we got the sweet and spicy. We load up. Different kinds of packaged smoked fish for the coming weeks, the fresh smoked salmon that they slice. We get the salads, salmon salad, whitefish salad, today he wanted the herring salad.”

They left with two big plastic bags in hand.

Changing with the times

Of course, Acme’s operation goes beyond its wholesale outlet. The 60,000-foot factory, along with other Acme plants in North Carolina and Florida, process an astronomical 11 million pounds of smoked fish a year, available at supermarkets across the country.

It’s a long way from when the company was first founded in 1906 by Harry Brownstein, who worked as a “jobber,” delivering smoked fish purchased from local smokehouses by horse-drawn wagon to local appetizing shops.

Despite being more than 100 years old, Acme keeps developing unique flavors, in addition to its traditional smoked fish, like its BBQ smoked salmon and maple hot smoked salmon (both of which this year won SOFI).
“Acme has grown with the tastes of the country and the tastes of the world by adding flavors to traditional smoked salmon that are sometimes unexpected, sometimes unique, sometimes chef-driven,” Schiff says.

No matter the flavor, it all starts with the whole fish. Inside the factory, workers wearing hair and beard nets, gloves, high rubber boots and white coats take giant, 30-pound Norwegian salmon and prepare them to be turned into kippered salmon. With surgical precision, they filet, debone and cut it up before it is smoked.

The company makes lox (salt-cured salmon that isn’t smoked), but it accounts for “less than 1 percent of the 11 million pounds a year we produce,” Schiff says.

Smoked salmon, whether it comes from Norway, Scotland, Chile or Canada, is made by mildly curing salmon for a week, then cold smoking for around 18 hours before it’s sliced.

The demand is greater than ever, Schiff says.

“We’re expanding into new markets in the country — exploding with growth,” he says. “Smoked salmon on a bagel is still up there with pizza as the best food in the world. And it’s so quintessentially New York.”

**Specials for the High Holidays**

For the upcoming Jewish High Holidays, people will queue up an hour before the 8 a.m. opening of the factory store. Specials for the holy days will include several experimental tastes cooked up by Fish Friday maven Gary Brownstein, a production manager who is in charge of the slicing department.

For Sept. 7, before the start of Rosh Hashanah, Brownstein’s special will be a “Summer Harvest Poke,” which includes smoked salmon, New Jersey corn, tomatoes, avocados and mangoes ($22/pound).

Then on Sept. 14, a few days before the start of Yom Kippur, his special will be a Thai chili cold smoked salmon and a Thai chili hot smoked salmon ($22/pound).

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