How Lox, Whitefish and Herring Became American Staples

It’s an appetizing story.

By Deena Shanker

October 7, 2019, 4:00 AM EDT  Corrected October 7, 2019, 8:20 AM EDT

Hot-smoked, cold-smoked, lemon-peppered, everything bagel-ed, kippered and candied. At Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Acme Smoked Fish, smoking salmon is an art with dozens of permutations.

The company produced 15 million pounds of smoked fish last year, more than 9 million of which were salmon. Whitefish is also popular. Acme’s herring, which comes pickled, creamed and in wine sauce, is another fan favorite. Sable, a smoked black cod known for its buttery texture and astronomical price tag, is also among the offerings.

Every Friday morning, Acme opens its Greenpoint location to the public, selling its delicacies at wholesale prices to anyone willing to make the trip. At 7:43 a.m. on a recent September morning, there were already 15 customers. Less than an hour later, the line had more than doubled in size, nearly stretching to the street. Those waiting included mothers with young children, a visitor from Japan buying for himself and his touring theater.
company, an HBO production assistant, and a collections manager from Brooklyn in his mid-60s. On particularly busy days, such as before Jewish holidays, the company says the line wraps around the block.

Acme wastes as little fish as possible. After trimming, the company recells surplus cuts, and some employees bring the rest home. **Photographer: Eugene Reznik/Bloomberg**

A worker submerges freshly filleted salmon in an ice bath. **Photographer: Eugene Reznik/Bloomberg**

Acme supplies such area stalwarts as Russ & Daughters, Barney Greengrass and Zabar’s & Co., as well as major retailers like Costco, Target and Wegmans. Since company founder Harry Brownstein, a Russian immigrant, began distributing smoked fish from a horse-drawn wagon in 1906, Acme has grown to become the largest American smokehouse, with operations in Florida, North Carolina and Chile, in addition to its Brooklyn headquarters.

The cuisine known as “appetizing,” which includes smoked fish, cream cheese, capers, and all the other accoutrement one might put on a bagel, traces its roots to New York’s turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants, who arrived en masse from Eastern Europe. Some 2 million to 2 ½ million Jews moved to the U.S. from 1880 to 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Act enacted significant immigration limits, and most settled in New York, said Annie Polland, executive director of the American Jewish Historical Society. “Herring was the food of survival,” she said. “It was not a delicacy.”
The business has changed with the times. The industry is now global, rather than local. The U.S. imported nearly 100 million pounds of cured fish in 2017, according to data from the National Fisheries Institute, a seafood trade group. The rise of commercial aquaculture in the 1980s allowed Acme to replace a mostly wild supply with a mostly farmed supply, driving down prices. Machinery was incorporated to slice and package the salmon, making products more widely available and convenient for consumers. Case shipments of smoked fish from food service distributors to restaurants—including independents, small chains, and, of course, bagel shops—were up 4% for the year ending in August, reaching $46.3 million dollars, according to market research group NPD. While the quantities have multiplied, the processes, whether brining in saltwater, dry curing in salt or smoking in ovens, remain largely the same.

The changes moved smoked fish from a specialty product to a mass item. Acme has seen 9% annual growth over the past twenty years and the company’s three brands—Acme, Blue Hill Bay and Ruby Bay—are sold in thousands of stores across the country.
The few remaining appetizing shops in New York are still largely family businesses, retaining their traditions as new generations modernize operations and expand their reach. That business is still growing, as well.

At Russ & Daughters on the Lower East Side, Niki Russ Federman and her cousin, Josh Russ Tupper, are fourth generation co-owners of the 105-year-old business. They took over in 2009, and the store count now also includes two restaurant cafes in Manhattan and a massive bakery and storefront in the Brooklyn Navy Yards. After an “intergenerational battle” over the website, the pair grew total sales by 330% from 2009 to 2018.

Unlike Acme and Russ & Daughters, Barney Greengrass on the Upper West Side hasn’t expanded since 1938, when it added its restaurant section. “We’re in the same four walls,” said second-generation owner Gary Greengrass, but “pushing the walls as far as they can go.” The store retains its unpretentious charm: Refrigerators are stocked with fresh horseradish, and shelves are lined with Kedem grape juice. The customer base has expanded, but the regulars keep coming back. “As I get older, people that were little kids—now they’re parents themselves,” he said. His son, Moe, takes time off from the eighth grade to help get customers their orders for Yom Kippur, the store’s busiest day of the year.

Like all delicious things in America, smoked fish is no longer the domain of any single ethnic group. The Jewish High Holiday season, including Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, and Yom Kippur, are not necessarily the biggest sales events of the year for Acme or Russ & Daughters. Christmas is as big, if not bigger, said Richard Schiff, vice president of Northeast sales for Acme.

“The food got co-opted in the best way,” Russ Federman said. “The same way we all eat pizza, everyone eats bagels and lox.”

(Corrects the spelling of Russ & Daughters.)

---

1 Although Jews became the stewards of smoked fish, they did not invent it. “They learned about much of this from Germans and German Jews,” said Hasia Diner, a professor of American Jewish History at New York University. (“Lox” is the German word for salmon.)
Economics

People Who Work from Home Earn