They’re hooked on one fishy biz

Smokehouse is a family affair

EMILY CASLOW REMEMBERS days as a little girl when her dad would take her to the family-owned fish business in Greenpoint and she would plunge her arm deep into a barrel and pull out whole herring for customers.

“I’d pull them out one at a time and put them in a plastic bag — that’s one of my first memories,” said Caslow, now 25 and the sales and marketing director for Acme Smoked Fish Corp.

Her dad, Robert Caslow, flashes back to his childhood when Acme’s founder — his grandfather, Harry Brownstein — dragged him to the Fulton Fish Market in lower Manhattan to take weekly Alaska red king salmon orders.

His father, Rubin Caslow, 84, still takes phone orders. He worked for his father-in-law, Brownstein, when Acme opened.

“I wish he’d come back, just for one day,” said Rubin Caslow, 84, of Brownstein. “He’d be delighted at the growth of the company, and with his great-grandchildren working here.”

Founded in 1954 — and celebrating 50 years in business this year — Acme outlasted more than a dozen local smokehouses and grew to be an industry giant.

Brownstein came to New York from Russia and worked for 30 years as a “wagon jobber,” buying smokehouse fish, and, with a horse-drawn wagon, selling his goods to small grocers.

When he opened his own smokehouse, Brownstein, who died in 1967, named it Acme because he wanted the business listed first in the phone book, the main source of advertising at the time.

Now, the 80,000-square-foot Gem St. plant employs 160 workers who smoke, cure, slice, pack and ship 7 million pounds of fish a year in an industry where self-service packaging has exploded in recent years, the family said.

According to a U.S. seafood industry report, Acme is the fourth-largest refrigerated seafood brand in the country, with 4% of the market share. In 2003, the company sold 1.9 million packs of trout, kipper and Atlantic salmon, chubs and sturgeon (packets, up 49% from 2002).

The secret to their success, they insist, is family.

“If we didn’t get along, we probably wouldn’t be this successful,” said Robert Caslow, 56.

Two Brownsteins and five Caslows work at the plant, including the fourth generation — Emily and her cousin, David Caslow, 30, the operations manager.

As the company grows, Emily wants to make Acme a household brand.

“You go to the deli and order Boar’s Head turkey. You don’t go in and order a pound of Acme,” she said. “That is my goal.”

BY MELISSA GRACE
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It’s no red herring: Robert Caslow joins daughter Emily Caslow in front of racks of whiting at their Acme Smoked Fish Corp. in Greenpoint.