TRACEABILITY
BY BENJAMIN SCHMERLER

GREENPOINT'S UNSUNG SMOKER

Acme supplies Nova to you and everyone you know.

GREENPOINT—Every New York Nova-nosher knows the names of the city's great smoked fish purveyors: Zabar's, Russ & Daughters, Barney Greengrass. What many may not know is that one Brooklyn company, Acme Smoked Fish, supplies them all with the bulk of their smoked fish products.

Acme is a fourth-generation family-run business whose waters run deep in the borough. Founded in the 1930s by a Russian immigrant, Harry Brownstein, the company's first smokehouse was a modest 15-person operation in East New York. Today, Acme employs 160 people at a mammoth 65,000-square-foot facility in Greenpoint, half a block from the East River. (Take the G Train to Nassau Avenue and proceed to 30 Gem Street, off Norman Avenue.) The factory is the largest single-plant producer of smoked fish and herring in the country, processing 30,000 pounds of seafood per day, which arrives daily from fish farms or fishermen in Chile, Scotland, Canada, Norway, and Alaska. Acme's products, in turn, are sold throughout the country (tip: if you're in LA, and hankering for some Acme Nova, try Nate and Al's). On Acme's success, co-President Robert Caslow says: "Our growth has really been slow and steady, introducing new products only when we've identified a market for them. It certainly hasn't been through acquisitions. In fact, we have a saying here: Some of the best deals we've made are the ones we never did."
Most of Acme's 30 products, including hot-smoked brook trout, hot-smoked tuna, and pickled herring are packaged under its Acme or Blue Hill Bay brands. The majority of the company's revenues come from the sale of cold-smoked salmon. The Acme line is made from wet-cured salmon that is cold-smoked over hickory and alder woods. The more expensive, all-natural Blue Hill Bay version (which is available at Costco—yes, Costco) is produced from fresh, never frozen, farm-raised or wild salmon that is dry-cured and then cold-smoked over local fruit woods. Dry-cured, cold-smoked salmon tends to have a silkier texture and saltier taste than the wet-cured kind.

Fifteen years ago, all of the company's smoked salmon was from wild, not farmed, fish. With the advent of fish farms, Acme started selling far more farm-raised smoked salmon, which costs less, tends to have a richer taste (due to its higher fat content), and is more visually appealing (the skins of the fish have fewer abrasions and are less mottled). Today, because of health and ecology concerns about farm-raised salmon, the company's fastest growing product line is wild smoked salmon. (Though truth be told, a number of Acme staffers interviewed said they prefer the richer farmed-raised variety.) For those interested in other types of wild smoked fish, General Manager Richard Schiff is quick to point out that the company's chubs and whitefish have always been caught wild.

A walk through the Acme plant yields a rich array of images: whole salmon effortlessly filleted by Guyanan immigrants; a cold-smoking room that would make a spacious NYC studio apartment; a vast, warehouse-sized freezer with 20 rows of pallets supporting hundreds of thousands of pounds of frozen fish; holding rooms filled with vats of brining mackerel and beautifully symmetrical rows of hanging chubs waiting to be hot-smoked; and an assembly-line-style room filled with 65 hairnet- and-smock-attired Polish women, both young and old, methodically skinning, slicing, and sealing the finished products.

Just as Acme is a multi-generational family-owned business, many employees work alongside parents and siblings, not to mention relatives who come from Poland to live in Greenpoint and work at the plant during the summer. While the preponderance of Poles is due to Greenpoint's large Polish community, how Acme's Guyanan workers found their way there is something of a mystery: "I think years ago one guy just walked in looking for work. Eventually, he told his friends, and before you knew it they were all car-pooling," said marketing director Emily Caslow. Both groups can claim success stories at the company: consider Augustine Silak, who started out putting boxes together at the plant 20 years ago and is now the head of production; and Aftabuddin Raymin, the company's head smoker. Not surprisingly, there are a few Polish-Guyanan smokehouse romances as well.

Among the facility's 160 workers, six are descendants of Harry Brownstein and his wife Anna Caslow. One of those is Gary Brownstein, who heads up the slicing department. "The biggest differences I've noticed from when I first began working here as a teenager are that we used to have to freeze the fish to get it hard enough to slice on a deli slicing machine. Now, that's unnecessary because we have specialized equipment. Also, these days, we sell far fewer whole Novas than pre-sliced ones." Today, Gary explains, the majority of the company's smoked fish is sold pre-sliced because it's expensive to hire the skilled labor to cut the fish, most consumers don't have the time or inclination to wait, and there are fewer "appetizing stores" that carry these items. Slicing technology has kept pace with demand: the company's five double-salmon-track machines can together cut up to 900 slices a minute (that's 378,000 slices per day, if you're counting).

Despite the inevitable introduction of new equipment such as the aforementioned slicing machines, as well as weigh stations and larger hot smokers—necessities for a company that has doubled its (undisclosed) revenues over the last 10 years—the basic ingredients (fish, salt, sugar, and water) and production process (high-velocity air, wood-fired smoke) remain largely the same as they were when Acme smoked its first fish.

Of course, there have been some slight changes in taste since Harry Brownstein started out back in the '30s. While the company's original smokehouse offered such Russian specialties as kapchunka (ungutted salted whitefish), and brined whole herring with their sperm sacs intact was all the rage for a while, alas, these items can no longer be found in Acme's product line, though they can be purchased at M & I International on Brighton Beach Avenue. Even though Brighton Beach's vast Russian immigrant population would seem to be a large

**SMOKIN'**

No discussion of a smoked fish house can proceed without a review of a few key terms. Here are Acme's definitions:

**Wet curing:** Brining fish in a salt (and sometimes sugar) water solution for anywhere from a few hours for chubs to as much as eight days for certain kinds of salmon.

**Dry curing:** Rubbing a salt-and-sugar mixture directly onto fish, usually for 24 hours for a three-pound salmon fillet.

**Cold smoking:** Drying cured fish with high-velocity room temperature air for between eight and 24 hours, while intermittently pumping wood-fired smoke into the chamber.

**Hot smoking:** Drying cured fish with high-velocity room temperature air, pumping wood-fired smoke into the chamber, and then baking the fish to an internal temperature of between 145 and 170 degrees (a total of three to six hours).
intra-Brooklyn marker for the company's products, as Richard Schiff observes, that's not the case. "The stores there buy from different smokehouses because we hot-smoke certain fish, such as chubs and sable, that Russians traditionally prefer cold-smoked."

If the company has yet to win over Brighton Beach's Russian expats, they have succeeded in winning favor with a host of other Brooklyn food producers, such as Gabilia's and Blue Ridge Farms, whose knishes and deli-style salads are complementary products Acme helps distribute along the East Coast via its fleet of thirteen trucks. "The relationship between our family and the families behind those companies dates back 40 and 25 years respectively. It was a natural fit," said Emily Caslow.

The neighborhood around Acme's plant has changed considerably since 1954, when the company moved into a 6,000-square-foot facility at its current address. While Acme's plant itself is still zoned for manufacturing, the area surrounding it is officially designated as mixed use, which has created some tension. For instance, not all the locals are thrilled with the trucks bringing fish to the plant, or the company's own fleet, which regularly starts its day when most people are still asleep. But unlike other former Brooklyn food and beverage companies (F. & M. Schaefer Brewing and Domino Sugar) who packed up and left, Acme is here to stay. Says Robert Caslow, "When I came into the business 37 years ago, there were maybe 10 big smokehouses in Brooklyn. We were just one of them, trying to make a living. Now we're the only big player left. I really believe that our family's cohesiveness, and our collective attention to detail have been the driving forces behind our success. All of us come to work every day, and it sets a certain tone for our employees." Emily Caslow is quick to credit Brooklyn too: "Greenpoint is where our roots are, and our proximity to Manhattan, and the triborough area in general, allows us to stay close to our customers and distribute goods to them on short notice."

While tours of the Acme plant are not available to the public, virtually all the company's products are, every Friday, from 8 a.m.-1 p.m. in a makeshift retail store. Prices are low, samples are provided, and freshness is, obviously, beyond reproach. On a recent visit, a burly plumber was overheard declaring, "I love this place!" And if you're wondering what to order, tell 'em "Gary Brownstein said I should buy a piece of the Nova wing."