Gastronaut: Acme Smoked Fish & Fish Fridays
Posted by Gordon Lingley | August 17, 2016

In this second installment of the Gastronaut series, we go behind the scenes of Acme Smoked Fish to demystify Fish Fridays.

In the heart of industrial Greenpoint, on an unremarkable street, behind an unmarked door, lies the largest smoked fish processor in the country: Acme Smoked Fish (30 Gem Street). And every Friday, and only Friday, from 8am until 1pm, you can take advantage of one of the neighborhood’s best (and worst kept) secrets when Acme opens its doors to the public for “Fish Friday.”
Finding Acme is a bit like entering a prohibition-era speakeasy, but no password or secret handshake is required. Before entering the warehouse (and even after entering) you may question if you’re in the right place, but trust me, it’s very right. Many first time visitors (including myself) walk past the entrance, only to find themselves doubling back after consulting their phones. However, more often than not, a queue stretches onto the sidewalk (especially during the holidays), clearly highlighting the proper doorway. You’ll know you’re on the right track when you see people strolling down the desolate street carrying shopping bags overflowing with smoked fish.

You’re probably wondering why you should bother with Fish Fridays. For starters, it’s cheap. Far cheaper than you’ll find at any grocery store. For example, on Fish Fridays you can buy gravlax for $18/pound. By comparison, the new Whole Foods that recently opened on Bedford (and also carries Acme’s gravlax, among other things) charges $8.99/quarter pound (though I did see them mark it down to $5.99 during their opening week). Similarly, Frankel’s Delicatessen, who also source their smoked fish from Acme, charge $20/half-pound—double what you’ll pay at Fish Fridays. That’s considerable savings. Same goes for everything on the menu. The second reason is because there are some special offerings that can’t be purchased anywhere else, like “Gary’s Special” or beet-cured salmon (more on those below). Beyond that, this is New York, and everyone has a guy for everything, make Acme your smoked fish guy.

History

Like many companies who adopt the “acme” moniker, Acme’s founder, Harry Brownstein, chose the name because of its double duty. Stemming from the Greek “akme” meaning “highest point” or “the point at which something or someone is best, perfect, or most successful,” the word instantly/presciently branded Brownstein’s company as a leader in the industry. Also, at the time of its incorporation, in 1954, a name starting with “ac” was almost guaranteed to appear first in the phonebook—today’s equivalent of showing up on the first page of a Google search. (note: a phonebook was an annual publication listing the phone numbers and addresses of residents and businesses, in alphabetical order.)
The history of Acme Smoked Fish (which is well-documented on their website) is as classic as its products. Like many New York institutions, Acme’s humble beginnings started out of a horse-drawn wagon in 1905. 111 years later, now in its 4th generation as a family-owned and operated business, Acme continues to flourish, expanding its product line and reach. If you’ve had smoked salmon recently, even outside of New York, there’s a good chance it originated here.

**Process**

Out of their Gem Street production facility, Acme processes a staggering amount of fish on a daily basis—upwards of 24,000 pounds. Per. Day. Annual production is approaching 10 million pounds, making them the largest smoked fish processor in the country.

My host for the afternoon, General Manager, Richard “Richie” Schiff, outfitted me for the tour (lab coat, hair net, and industrial strength rubber boots) and we made our way into the belly of the beast. As you can imagine, dealing with so much raw meat could be a health code nightmare, but Acme’s strict operating procedures from start to finish minimize any potential risks. One thing you notice immediately: for a place that deals with so much fish, it doesn’t smell like fish. Well, it smells a little like *smoked* fish, but it doesn’t smell like *raw* fish.

The first stop was a room filled with bins of fresh whole salmon, where a team of cutters skillfully and masterfully gutted and cleaned each massive fish. The messiest part of the job, descaling, is completely automated and done in an enclosed machine by high pressure water jets. Some fish are filleted, while others (primarily whitefish) are smoked whole.

From there we moved on to a room full of fish being brined in massive bins. The composition of the brine and the brining time vary depending on the type of fish and the desired finished product, but, in general, it’s a mixture of water, salt, and sugar.

Next stop: the smokers. On the day I visited they weren’t smoking anything, which allowed access to the apartment-sized smokers. Surprisingly, all of the smoke is created by a machine about the size of a keg.

The final stage is portioning and packaging. Whenever I see a packaging room, I can’t help but think of the “I Love Lucy” episode, where Lucy’s working the line in a candy manufacturer. Unlike that scene, Acme’s process is well-oiled, and though there are many moving parts, it’s like an orchestra with everyone playing a critical role in the finished product. One of the more fascinating bits of machinery was the device responsible for the paper-thin slices of fish in every package—a conveyor belt slowly inches each fillet forward, where a razor sharp, oscillating, serrated blade glides through each fillet with laser-like precision.

From there it’s immediately sent to distributors around the country, for although it’s cured, smoked, and vacuum-packed, it’s still basically a fresh product, with an expiration date. The entire process, with the exception of some products that require a longer cure, takes just a few days, allowing Acme to get the freshest product available to its customers. The only way to get it any fresher is to make it yourself (for which they offer DIY gravlax kits).

Over the years, the selection has changed a bit. Acme now operates as a Kosher facility, so no shellfish or bottom-feeders (though they do carry eel, which they import from Europe). To this day Richie still wistfully reminisces about the giant, smoked shrimp.

**Helpful Definitions:**

- **Lox:** Traditionally lox was only made with the belly of the salmon, but now other cuts are used as well. Lox is salt-cured, creating a texture that is silky, rich, a bit translucent, and... salty. It is not smoked.
- **Nova/Nova Salmon/Nova Lox**: Traditionally made from salmon originating from Nova Scotia, Nova now refers more to the process rather than the origin (as there is also "Western Nova" that originates from the Pacific). While also brined like traditional lox, it is typically less salty and is also cold-smoked (more on that later).

- **Gravlax**: Traditionally gravlax was made by salting salmon and lightly fermenting it by burying it, literally, in the sand above the high-tide line (gravlax, the word, originates from the Scandinavian word grava, meaning "to dig"). Thankfully, the fermentation is no longer part of the process and the salmon is simply buried and cured under a thick layer of salt, sugar, and dill. Acme also sells kits for making your own gravlax at home.
• Kippered: Refers to a process of brining and then hot-smoking (or baking) the fish. The end result is cooked through but retains a moist and flaky texture, and more pronounced smokiness.

• Royal Cut: This simply refers to a thicker cut of salmon (closer to ¼ inch, as opposed to the super thin slices of lox, gravlax, and most others) taken from the belly of the salmon.
• Sable: Another term for Black Cod, Sable is oily and subsequently more “fishy” tasting than some other fish. Thankfully, the smoking process mellows most of the fishiness and what you’re left with is an incredibly rich piece of smoked fish. At $25/pound, it’s the most expensive thing on the menu at Fish Fridays, and well worth the splurge if you’re looking for something different and luxurious.

• Whitefish: The term “whitefish” is usually used to loosely describe various white-fleshed fish, but true whitefish is a freshwater species related to trout and abundant in the Great Lakes. It has a particularly sweet, moist, delicate flesh and is a favorite for smoking. In Acme’s case, it’s most of the options in the “Specialty Smoked” section of their menu.
Cold-Smoked: Cold-smoked salmon is traditionally wet or dry brined before being smoked at lower than 80 degrees (F). Because the salmon doesn’t get cooked, the flesh retains most of its moisture as well as the characteristic translucent pink color.

Hot-Smoked: Usually smoked between 130-140 degrees (F), hot-smoking results in a more cooked texture and appearance, and greater smoke flavor. In the Pacific Northwest, this is often taken a step further to create “Salmon Jerky” or “Salmon Candy,” where the fish is heavily smoked, and often glazed, resulting in a product that is both drier and sweeter than other preparations.

Tips:

- Don’t be afraid to ask for samples, within reason.
- The beet-cured salmon doesn’t taste like beets, but it looks amazing. It was developed for Black Seed Bagels, but they occasionally sell it at Fish Fridays. Worth getting for the color alone.
- Get “Gary’s Special” if it’s available. The offering varies from week to week, but it’s generally a poke-like mix of smoked salmon mixed with other ingredients (on one occasion it was a Thai-inspired mix of ginger and peppers, while another week paired the salmon with avocado and mango).
- There are two kinds of Pastrami Salmon available, one the “house” recipe and the other developed by celebrity chef David Burke. In my opinion, the original is the better of the two and should definitely be ordered.
- Like many places in New York, it’s CASH ONLY, and things can add up quickly. Plan accordingly.

Acme Smoked Fish is located at 30 Gem St., just off North 15th. Fish Fridays happens every Friday from 8am until 1pm. Cash Only.
About Gordon Lingley
When Gordon's not cooking, he's thinking about cooking. If unchecked, he will eat the whole pie.
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1 COMMENT

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August 18, 2016 at 9:43 pm
When will yall have my Nova Wings Please.? Everything yall have. !