Aftabuddin Rayman smokes alone, in a windowless room, deep into the night. Four times a week, as most people are getting off work, Mr. Rayman enters the narrow canyon of Acme Smoked Fish Corporation, where, on a typical day, 30,000 to 50,000 pounds of salmon, brook trout, whitefish, bluefish, sable and chubs await his arrival. The fish, whole or filleted, has already been cured in brine. It hangs in neat rows on six-foot-tall racks, above tiled floors that still cling after being hosed down by the day-shift. Almost alone in a silent factory that smells like smokingcd campfires, Mr. Rayman wheeled the racks one after another, into walk-in ovens, creating a solid wall of fish in each one. He sets the thermo- stats, leaving his charges to dry for several hours, and then returns like a sorcerer to conjure up the smoke that will give the company's fish its trademark flavor.

Acme has its origins in the early 1900's as a pushcart owned by a Russian immigrant named Harry Brownstein, who sold smoked fish in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. Today, under three of Mr. Brownstein's grandchildren, the 130-employee company processes about eight million pounds of North Atlantic, Great Lakes, Pacific and South Pacific fish a year, selling to all states except Alaska, and occasionally to Israel.

Among its customers are some of New York's most discerning fish purveyors. Saul Zabar drops in once a week to select stock for Zabar's smoked fish counter; Aquavit gets its herring and smoked salmon there; Mark Russ Federman shops there for his Lower East Side store Russ & Daughters. And although Mr. Rayman's name may be unknown among Acme's customers, his epicurean colleagues like him for his devotion to the craft of smoking fish.

"Somehow, everywhere I turn I end up with fish," said Mr. Rayman, 44, who comes from Guyana and spent his teenage years among the glitterati, the idea that he should end up as unknown among Manhattan's epicurean crowd. "I grew up using a lot of tropical fish," he explained. "We eat them in curries. It isn't unusual."

"I can do this as long as I'm able to do it, you know, because I'm happy here," says Aftabuddin Rayman, fish smoker.

"It's a kind of a lifetime job," he said. "It needs somebody who's reliable, conscientious and relatively bright; otherwise a lot of other people's labor has gone for naught." Mr. Rayman contends that good training alone is not enough to make an excellent smoker. "They've got to care about it," he said. "They've got to care about how the fish comes out. Not just to do it as a job."

It would seem that a fish smoker would run some of the same health risks as firefighters: stinging eyes, irritated noses and lungs. But Mr. Rayman says that the smoke doesn't bother him and that his doctor has given him a clean bill of health.

Mr. Rayman has three children, but none have followed him into his profession. And if, somewhere in the city, there is a community of fellow smokers with whom Mr. Rayman might compare technique and exchange tips, he has never heard of it. "But I never went out looking," he added, explaining that he has kept this secret, "or else I can't go in the bed." Mr. Rayman says that the smoke doesn't bother him and that his doctor has given him a clean bill of health. His wife, a former packer at the company, maintains certain rules, though.

"When I come home, the clothes I wear, you've got to put outside the bedroom," he said. He takes a bath every morning to slough off his smoky outer layer, "or else I can't go in the bed." He added, laughing, "I have three children, but none have followed him into his profession. And if, somewhere in the city, there is a community of fellow smokers with whom Mr. Rayman might compare technique and exchange tips, he has never heard of it."

But the job also allows for down periods. "Some days I don't do it properly and it wouldn't cook," he said. Weather, too, plays a role. On hot, humid days the fish require three or four hours of drying but less smoking time. Winter days call for more smoking, but then it's easy to make the fish too dry. Mr. Rayman's work includes cleaning the smoke generators every day to remove accumulated tar. It can also involve grueling extra days around Christmas or Passover, when he regularly works 16-hour shifts to meet all the extra orders. But the job also allows for down periods while the ovens do their magic. Mr. Rayman, who is Muslim, uses the time to attend to his religious duties. A calendar of prayer times hangs behind the smoking machines, and Mr. Rayman keeps a prayer rug and a plastic-wrapped copy of the Koran in a soot-blackened locker along the wall.

Mr. Caslow, who trained Mr. Rayman, said there was very little turnover for the smoker's position. "We've got to care about it," he said. "I'm able to do it, you know, because I'm happy here."