Smoked salmon

Innovation makes ancient art part of healthy trends

By Melissa Wood

There is no rushing a properly smoked salmon. At Browne Trading Co. in Portland, Maine, John Donahue feeds the smoker with fresh Scottish salmon fillets in a process that has changed little over the centuries.

Before smoking, he brines the product using a salt and sugar mixture and lets the salmon sit for 14 to 17 hours. Then he washes off the brine, letting the fish dry for another 24 to 48 hours.

When it's ready to smoke, most of the salmon, like the majority of smoked salmon in the U.S. market, is cold smoked. This means that the temperature can't go over 84.9 degrees in the smoker, which means that Donahue spends six hours tending to an adjacent kiln fueled by a mixture of hardwoods, fruitwoods and sawdust.

"It's basically a drying process," says Donahue. "Or second drying process. You're really trying to infuse the flavor."

Ancient art it may be, but salmon smokers are developing products and capitalizing on trends in healthy eating to try to get more people to choose their product over other proteins.

Though it was first developed for the kosher market, MacKnight Smoked Salmon's salmon bacon, cured with a blend of rock salt, spices and maple syrup and naturally loaded with omega-3 fatty acids became a hit on both sides of the pond.

"That product fit into a category that connected with people looking for healthy eating alternatives, people who are on diets," says Stephen Nicholson, director of culinary innovations at MacKnight, which is based in Cumbria, U.K. "It opened up a huge varied market."

The company is also mindful of the economy-driven trend of people eating at home rather than dining out; they still want high-quality foods, but they want something easy to prepare.

With that in mind, it introduced smoked salmon slices sized to fit the top of a bagel.

"We're basically looking at consumer trends, looking at people's lifestyles and trying to develop a protein around that mold," says Nicholson.

Gabriel Viteri, VP of strategy and business development for Acme Smoked Fish, in Brooklyn, N.Y., agrees that expanding the smoked salmon market means appealing to those consumers who haven't yet made it a part of their diet.

"Our goal as an industry is to make these products a regular staple," says Viteri, who points out that smoked salmon consumption is four times higher in Europe than the United States. "How do we educate different consumer demographics to start replacing some of the proteins that they eat with smoked salmon?"

Along with offering innovations, Viteri says it's also important to offer a consistent-quality product, which can be a challenge in times of short supply. Most smoked salmon producers have faced the same issues of higher raw material costs and limited supply, and they have all struggled to keep prices low for consumers, he says.

Viteri adds that the danger of smaller margins is that producers may be just happy to accept whatever they can get for supply.

Supply is not an issue for True North Salmon in Blacks Harbour, New Brunswick, the only smokehouse on the East Coast that has its own supply, according to Andrew Lively, the company's marketing communications manager. He notes that smoked salmon was once reserved for celebratory occasions, sold mainly in full sides that could be laid out at a wedding reception or other formal affair. Increasingly, people are buying it in 4- and 8-ounce packages for everyday use.

"Smoked salmon sales are increasing for us," says Lively. "People want to know where their stuff comes from and we can trace where our salmon comes from right back to the hatchery."

Recently True North introduced integrated multi-trophic aquaculture sites. This method cultivates complementary species, such as seaweed, mussels and sea urchins with the salmon to create a sustainable ecosystem. One thing Lively has learned as he's heard people talk about sustainability is that it's not a destination, but a road.

"There's always advances we can make, and that's true for aquaculture as well," says Lively.

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