New York’s Best Smoked Fish Secretly All Comes From One Place

But at New York's top delis, the flavor—and cost—significantly varies. Why is that, and in a taste test, which one comes out on top?

By James Tarmy and Kate Krader
January 5, 2017, 2:02 PM EST

“This looks like jewelry,” said Bloomberg Pursuits’ food editor, Kate Krader. “Like beautiful, luscious jewelry.”

The “this” in question was a small pile of smoked salmon from Barney Greengrass, and Krader, who’d spent the last five hours trudging across Manhattan and Brooklyn in an exhaustive attempt to sample some of the best smoked fish in New York, had hit a wall.

“For what it’s worth,” she said with a faraway look in her eyes, “it tastes like it’s floating in the air.”

(Krader was subsequently given a piece of a bagel and a glass of water and offered the opportunity to take a break. She persevered.)

The fish counter at Zabar’s on the Upper West Side.
Photographer: James Tarmy/Bloomberg

Our restaurant expert is used to mouthwatering food binges, but Wednesday’s trip to Barney Greengrass, Zabar’s, Russ & Daughters, and Shelsky’s was a little different. Each of those delis, famed for their glistening stacks of smoked fish, uses one supplier, Brooklyn's Acme Smoked Fish, for at least some of their stock. Each location, however, prices that same smoked salmon differently (from $39.96 to $45 a pound), and each location has its own dedicated following.

Krader was on a quest to see if the differences between each location’s Acme fish boiled down to mere marketing, or if there was something more sophisticated at play.

Krader was on a quest to see if the differences between each location’s Acme fish boiled down to mere marketing, or if there was something more sophisticated at play.
By the end of the day, stark distinctions between each store’s Acme fish had become apparent. “Our suppliers do special stuff for us,” said Joshua Russ Tupper, whose family founded Russ & Daughters in 1914 and who spoke to Krader as he was slicing fish behind the store’s Lower East Side counter. “They know our tastes.”

It was a claim made by virtually every location: Each store had specific criteria, and a special relationship with Acme, that made their fish “the best.”

“We have different types of salmon: wild fish, farmed fish—and then we have different sides of the fish,” said Ellen Lee-Allen, the senior marketing director at Acme Smoked Fish. “These are all variables that affect the finished product.”

What does not differ, she said, is the process in which the salmon in question is made—all of it cured with salt and then “cold smoked” in an oven at approximately 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Lee-Allen confirmed that each store has its own particular methodology for choosing its salmon—based on preferences in flavors or textures.

“Saul Zabar [of Zabar’s] used to come in here himself to select smoked fish from us, then he trained someone to take over his job,” she said. “They look for things they think will please their clientele. Each place does that.”

Once the salmon is in the store, the delis boast a specific methodology for slicing fish—some cut super-thin short slices, some cut longer, “European-style” pieces, others were thick and meaty—and each was meant to imbue the fish’s flavor and mouth-feel with a specific taste. But did it matter? And if so, whose methodology was best?

Krader sampled each store’s Acme nova in situ, then took more slices back to Bloomberg HQ, where she let them warm up to equal temperatures and tasted again. She graded each sample on four criteria: appearance, texture, melt-in-your-mouthness, and finally, overall taste. (Each quality could be awarded a maximum of 10 points, for a total of 40 points.)

After submitting the results, Krader emphasized that her notes were deeply personal. “I’m sure some salmon devotees out there will disagree with me,” she said. “But I’m telling it like I taste it.” Her findings, and tasting notes, are below.
No. 4: Zabar’s sliced Nova, $42/lb.

Zabar’s smoked salmon. Photographer: Evan Ortiz/Bloomberg

- **Appearance**: 5
- **Texture**: 5
- **Melt In Mouthness**: 5
- **Taste**: 6
- **Total**: 21
- **Notes**: “It’s almost chewy,” Krader said, adding diplomatically that she wanted “to eat it on a bagel.”

No. 3: Shelsky’s Eastern Gaspe Nova, $39.96/lb.

Shelsky’s smoked salmon. Photographer: Evan Ortiz/Bloomberg

- **Appearance**: 8
- **Texture**: 6
- **Melt In Mouthness**: 6
- **Taste**: 5
- **Total**: 25
- **Notes**: “This tastes like standard smoked salmon,” Krader said. “It’s nicely cut, and I appreciate its thinness, but it’s not distinctive.”
No. 2: Russ & Daughters Gaspe Nova Smoked Salmon, $40/lb.

- **Appearance:** 7
- **Texture:** 9
- **Melt In Mouthiness:** 7
- **Taste:** 9
- **Total:** 32
- **Notes:** “This one tastes really rich and complex,” said Krader. “This gets all your flavor in one bite.”

No. 1: Barney Greengrass's Eastern Nova, $45/lb.

- **Appearance:** 9
- **Texture:** 7
- **Melt In Mouthiness:** 9
- **Taste:** 9
- **Total:** 34
- **Notes:** “The smoke in it is gorgeous,” Krader said. “It really does seem special.”