

# SMOKIN'

Venerable smoked fish firm  
finding way back to wild

*by Amanda Chater*



**DIRECTLY OPPOSITE THE** smoke-filled chambers in Acme Smoked Fish plant is a sign proclaiming, "This is a smoke-free workplace."

The irony wasn't lost on me, because I was coming to the end of a four-hour tour during which I'd learned almost all there is to know about this, the country's largest producer of smoked fish.

Established in the 1930s, Acme is a producer of smoked salmon, whitefish, black cod, chub, and blue fish, among many others. Until 1990, all of the fish that passed through this 75,000-square-foot plant was wild, but the increase in farming, which has also helped shift consumers' tastes, has meant that now only 3 to 5 percent of the fish that's smoked here is wild.

That figure is likely to increase, however, because wild fish is back in vogue, even here on the East Coast, where many have preferred farmed for its more even color and uniform fat markings.

Acme produces 150,000 pounds of fish every week, and business is booming. Back in the 1970s, said co-president Robert Caslow, grandson of Acme's founder, Harry Brownstein, production totaled closer to 10,000 pounds per week. Of today's throughput, 60 to 70 percent is salmon, some farmed from Chile and Norway.

The wild product, however, comes from farther afield. Salmon — king, coho, and sockeye — is shipped in from Alaska, as is black cod. Whitefish and

"We are very particular on the areas of Alaska we use," said Buzz Billik, director of business development. "The king [salmon] we use is only troll-caught because it gives the most consistent grades of salmon. For coho, we also focus on troll-caught, from Southeast Alaska.

"Sockeye is available in many areas, but we've selected one region where the run comes through in smaller quantities so the fish can be handled with care and attention. It's gillnet production. Because the quantities are more manageable, the quality is better."

Everything at Acme is done on-site. You can walk through the plant, linearly, from the loading dock, through the freezers that are big enough to house several New York apartments, past the curing, the smoking, and finally into the slicing and packaging room.

The biggest changes in Acme's business over the years have been in this, the last room, and now 60 percent of product is sold pre-sliced. "Years ago, pre-sliced salmon was not considered quality, but now it is; people actually demand it now," said Caslow.

Acme's product can be found all over the place — under the Acme and Blue Hill Bay Brands, as well as the recently launched Ruby Bay — in New York institutions such as Zabar's and even Costco, which, astonishingly, buys 10 to 15 percent of Acme's throughput.

Acme also produces private label brands for some customers. Its products are available for food service and retail applications. ★

### What you need to know

All Acme Smoked Fish and Blue Hill Bay Smoked Seafood products, with the exception of smoked sturgeon, are certified kosher by KOF-K.

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chub come from the Great Lakes area, mackerel from Norway and Canada, and bluefish from New England.

