

First Microbreweries, Now Micro-Canneries Flourish in NW

Tom Banse (2009-10-19)

You've heard of micro-breweries. How about "micro-canneries?" They specialize in locally-caught, hand-packed albacore and salmon. A growing number of commercial fishing families are choosing to can their catch themselves. They can't begin to compete with supermarket prices. But some of the custom-canned fish is reaching farmers markets, mail order catalogs, food co-ops, and the internet. KPLU's Tom Banse reports from Bellingham.

Full Story

This is a story about your tuna fish sandwich or better, the ingredients for a million tuna fish sandwiches. For about five months of the year, commercial fishermen can catch albacore tuna off the West Coast. Until about 10 years ago, 90 percent of the region's catch went to the major packers -- Bumblebee, Chicken-of-the-Sea, and Starkist. But then all that changed says fishermen Harvey Cosky, accompanied by his pet parrot.

Harvey Cosky: "Up and down the coast, they had buying stations all along. Then everything got shipped overseas, so they didn't need all these buying stations."

Cosky and his wife Judy were literally left sitting at the dock with a boatload of tuna.

Judy Cosky: "I was mad at the canners, why don't you buy our fish. Then I thought, well shoot, they're not obligated to buy our fish. Let's try some other way. So anyway, I was going to start a cannery."

...Their own cannery. They found another fishing family to go in on it with them. Then and now, workers skin and trim and portion the tuna by hand.

Sound: [fillet table ambience]

The few machines on the canning line look like they could've come from a history museum.

Sound: [mechanical clanking, puffing]

It was "touch and go at first." But cannery president Russ Edwards says through trial and error they've steered the business into the black.

Russ Edwards: "Probably the average person I'm sure would've given up. But I guess we're a little too stubborn to give up and now we're glad we didn't."

What started with a few entrepreneurial fishermen has blossomed into a full-blown trend.

Russ Edwards: "When we started, there might have been a half a dozen labels out there in the Northwest. There's probably a good 60-70 individual labels now and at least a half a dozen micro-canneries that service those labels."

This cannery, Pelican Packers, is in Bellingham. Other tuna fishing families have opened their own micro-canneries in Port Townsend, Oak Harbor, and Gig Harbor, Washington and Coos Bay, Oregon. Canned salmon, smoked salmon pat and on occasion sea cucumber, scallops, and crab also come off the lines.

Canning your own catch and designing a label is one thing. But then you have to get someone to buy it. Russ Edwards says word-of-mouth recommendations and free samples are key. It takes person-to-person marketing to make it go.

Russ Edwards: "The farmers markets, they do extremely well because they get a chance to sample the product and explain why it is more expensive, whereas if it's on the shelf, unless it's repeat customers and stuff like that, new customers look at it and wonder why it's so much more expensive."

The local product costs around double what supermarket canned tuna costs. Bellingham deli owner Will Annett says he switched to the Wild Pacific Seafood brand after visiting the cannery on a chef's tour.

Will Annett: "It's almost twice as much as what I was paying. But what I went ahead and did was I upped the price of the sandwiches. They're still selling well. The reason they're selling well is because I'm marketing the fact that they're a sustainable local fishery."

Sound [at deli counter] "Order up!..."

Annett is also convinced the custom canned fish offers superior taste. That's a common selling point of the fishermen who can their own catch. They contend once you try their tuna or salmon, you'll be hooked. I'm Tom Banse in Bellingham, Washington. © Copyright 2009, [KPLU](#)