

Bangor Metro, November 2006
“High-End Canner”
By Henry Garfield

Mike Cote Bought One of Maine’s Last Canneries and is showing the world that “gourmet canned food” is no oxymoron.

Cannery Row it ain’t. Visitors to Maine’s last full-variety canning operation will find no Steinbeckian poem, stink, grating noise, quality of light, tone, habit, or dream. What they will discover instead, nestled on the shore of Holmes Bay eight miles east of Machias, is a small, thoroughly modern, clean, efficient, operation newly dedicated to the production of fine Maine cuisine—in cans.

Look’s Canning Company might have faded into history were it not for the vision of Auburn native Mike Cote, who bought the plant in 2003, after 20-plus years with Pepperidge Farm and Odwalla. “I’m a food guy,” he says. “That’s what I do. I started out as a route driver for Pepperidge Farm, and worked my way up. I had been in every aspect of the food business except production.”

The cannery, just over the East Machias town line in Whiting, had been owned by the Look family since its beginnings in 1917. In its heyday, it was one of dozens along the Maine coast. The others have all fallen silent, save for the Stinson sardine cannery in Prospect Harbor and a B&M plant in Portland.

Cote changed the company name to Look’s Gourmet Foods, and began a campaign to convince high-end retailers that good things could come in cans. The purchase price included trademark rights to the Bar Harbor Foods label, which Look’s has owned since 1946.

Cote’s partner in life and business, Cynthia Fisher, serves as vice president of marketing and quality assurance. “But we both do a little bit of everything,” she says. “The other day I was down there on the lobster line.”

“We’re the only canner of shelf-stable Maine lobster in the United States,” Cote says. Other offerings include lobster newburg and bisque, wild herring fillets, and whole shelled Maine mussels.

“It’s all about the quality,” Fisher says. “People tend to think, if it’s in a can, how good can it be? Most people assume cans have preservatives. But the can itself is the preservative. We’re using all natural ingredients.”

Tapping into the natural foods niche has already paid handsome dividends. Sales have tripled in three years. Cote has increased the workforce to 21 full-time employees, up from seven when he bought the plant. New equipment has been brought in to keep up with the demand. Packing and shipping will soon be moved to a warehouse in nearby Cutler, freeing up the cannery for food production and office space.

But the proof, as they say, is in the pudding—old-fashioned Indian pudding being one of the 35 different products that Look’s puts out. “When you do things in small batches, you can really achieve that restaurant quality,” Cote says. “And once people taste our food, they’re convinced.”

That includes Food TV network personality Emeril Lagasse, whom they met at a trade show in Chicago.

“He had his bodyguards, and there were crowds of people around him,” Cote recalls. “We had sent him three cases of our clam juice, and never heard back from him. I was a little reticent about approaching him. So Cynthia works her way over to him, and introduces herself and says, ‘Did you ever get those three cases of clam juice?’ And he says, ‘Yes, its great, I use it all the time.’ She points out our booth and offers him a taste of our clam chowder. He says, ‘I’ll be right over.’ He finally gets through the crowd, and Cynthia reaches through the people and hands him a cup.

“He just stood there and ate it, one spoonful after another, until it was gone.”