



Mike Cote bought Look's Canning Company in April 2003 and changed the name to Look's Gourmet Food Company. His partner, Cynthia Fisher is the company's vice president for marketing and quality assurance (BDN Photo by Linda Coan O'Kresik).

Can Do!

Clams in a can, anyone? Baked beans the same way? Indian pudding?

Some of New England's most traditional foods do come in cans - all the work of Look's Gourmet Food Company in Whiting.

"You can be in a can and be very high-end," said Mike Cote. "The can is just the way of protecting the product. I don't like the taste of frozen anything, anyway."

Cote is the new owner of an old-fashioned canned food company located in an old-fashioned, two-story wooden building at the top of Holmes Bay. The sign on the building's end that drivers see from Route 191 reads, "Look's Canning Company, established 1917."

Cote bought the seafood-oriented company in April from Donald Look, son of company founder William Look. At 78, Donald had grown tired of managing the business that had less than \$800,000 in sales in 2002. Cote said he expects sales in excess of \$1.3 million for fiscal year April 2003 to 2004.

Known by generations of Mainers largely for its Atlantic brand of baby chopped clams in cans and clam juice in bottles, the company today features more upscale products that still fit in plenty of kitchens Down East and beyond.

Cote, 48, moved from California last spring to make the business even bigger. For more than 20 years a marketing and distribution executive with the Pepperidge Farms brand, he is the first outside owner of the company that has always belonged to the Look family.

Eight months after Cote came aboard, the plant is producing 32 product lines. Brand names include Cap'n John for Canadian sales; Atlantic for mainstream grocery sales; and Bar Harbor, the gift and gourmet line.

He inherited production machinery that dates to the 1930s, he estimates. He recently spent \$75,000 to upgrade the facility.

Chowders, bisques, dips, spreads, clams, mussels, lobster, salmon and crabmeat are part of the fare that is bought locally and prepared on-site. Baked beans, Indian pudding and Newburg sauce fill out the line.

Cynthia Fisher, Cote's partner with a background in sales and management, has joined him for 12-hour days in the manufacturing venture. She serves as the company's vice president for marketing and quality assurance.

"This is definitely a midlife crisis," Fisher, 43, joked earlier this week after the production rush for holiday sales had eased. "Mike didn't just buy a sports car; he bought a cannery."

Cote grew up in Auburn and spent one year at Maine Maritime Academy, so he has a handle on what Mainers want.

He even called on his mother, a Mainer now living in Florida, to supply her recipe for lobster stew. When she arrived last summer to see his operation, he put her on the production line. They were canning lobster that day.

Once thriving in the '70s, Look's Canning had employed as many as 35 or 40 workers. At the time of the sale, there were about seven employees, including a son and daughter of Donald Look. There are 21 on the payroll now, most of them with full-time status.

The Looks have stayed on. Jeffrey Look is the company's production manager, and Linda Look Huntley works in the plant.

Donald Look, now retired, didn't go far either. He still lives on Cutler Road within sight of the building. He also wanders back in from time to time, interested in the changes under way.

"He has been supportive," Cote said. "He wants to see the brands go on that his father developed. His mission was to make the company so someone else could come in, take it on and maintain the products.

"He also wanted it to stay in Whiting. That was important. He didn't want anyone to take the brand and run," Cote said.

"I'm not doing that. I'm here. We bought a house here. We're only trying to bring more prominence to the brands now."

Cote's last job was marketing the Fresh Samantha natural juice brand out of California, so he knows what the market trends are.

His first change was converting the company's name. Cote dropped "Canning" and replaced it with "Gourmet Food."

"My job now is to keep the brands alive, and to keep the demand up," Cote said.

Just a month ago, Cote got some of his chowders into Wild Oats, the national line of natural-food supermarkets.

The expanded production means a bigger work force. All of them are local folks, too.

Joan Gatcomb, the oldest worker at 71, spent 35 years working for the Looks. She wishes she had many more years in her.

"It's fantastic what has happened," Gatcomb said. "I am just so thrilled. I don't want to retire yet. I'm not ready to.

"I like these new people. I'd like to have my working life to do over again and see where [Cote] takes this company."

So does the rest of Whiting.

BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTOS BY LINDA COAN O'KRESIK

Linda Harmon (left), Betty Baker (center) and other employees label and pack clam juice recently at Look's Gourmet Food Company in Whiting. Mike Cote bought the business in April 2003 and expects sales of at least \$1.3 million in April 2003-04, from \$800,000 in 2002.

Chef Doug Look, a distant relation to the founding Looks, carries a case of bottled clam juice to a labeling machine at Look's Gourmet Food Company in Whiting in December. Expanded production has led to a payroll of 21 employees, all local.

Mike Cote bought Look's Canning Company in April 2003 from the founder's son Donald Look and changed the name to Look's Gourmet Food Company. "You can be in a can and be very high-end," says Cote. His partner, Cynthia Fisher (right), is the company's vice president for marketing and quality assurance.