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High-end in a can: New owner revives Down East cannery

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WHITING — Less than a year after buying an 87-year-old canned food business, Mike Cote has expanded the company's product lines, boosted sales by more than 50 percent and increased the payroll. Cote last spring bought Look's Canning Company, a Maine institution that has been canning clams, Indian pudding, baked beans and other foods since 1917.

It has been known by generations of Mainers largely for its Atlantic brand of baby chopped clams in cans and clam juice in bottles.

One of the first things he did was change the name to Look's Gourmet Food Co. in hopes of entering specialty markets.

"You can be in a can and be very high-end," he said.

"The can is just the way of protecting the product. I don't like the taste of frozen anything, anyway."

Cote, 48, bought the company in April from Donald Look, son of company founder Willard Look. At 78, Look was ready to step down.

After buying the company, Cote moved to eastern Maine from California, where he worked as a marketing and distribution executive for Peppridge Farm for more than 20 years.

His last job before coming to Maine was marketing the Fresh Samantha juice brand for Odwalla Inc.

But Cote knew about Maine because he grew up in Auburn and spent a year at Maine Maritime Academy.

Under Cote's ownership, the plant is now 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. Among its new customers are Wild Oats markets and L.L. Bean.

Cote says sales for the fiscal year from mid-April 2003 to April of this year will be about \$1.3 million, up from \$800,000 in 2002.

Chowders, bisques, dips, spreads, clams, mussels, lobster and salmon are part of the fare that is prepared in



Mike Cote, owner of Look's Gourmet Food Co., poses for a photograph with his partner Cynthia Fisher, vice president for marketing and quality assurance, in Whiting, Maine.

the factory, where Cote has invested \$75,000 on new machinery. 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 in the venture as vice president for marketing and quality assurance.

Look's Canning at one time had as many as 35 or 40 workers, but the work force had fallen to just seven workers a year ago. Now, there are 21 full- and part-time employees.

The Looks maintain a presence at the plant. Donald Look's son, Jeffrey Look, is the company's production manager, and daughter Linda Look Huntley works in the plant.

Donald Look, now retired, lives on Cutler Road within sight of the building. He comes in from time to time, interested in the changes.

"(Donald Look) 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."