

Talk of Maine

By Jeff Clark

The Last Cannery

A gourmet food company in Whiting hopes to make Maine the canning capital it once was.

Mike Cote has a problem -- canned food isn't sexy. Cote is trying to rejuvenate the last multi-product food cannery in Maine, the sole survivor of an era when a hundred or more canneries churned out everything from pie fillings to canned lobster for markets all over the world. He's gone gourmet and all-natural, hitching a ride on the most popular trends in the food industry. Every year he puts tens of thousands of miles on his car, as well as a lot more on his frequent-flyer card, traveling the country to promote his products. The best sales tools he has are three stainless steel Thermoses filled with clam chowder, lobster bisque, and red or white clam sauce. The biggest obstacle he faces is that darn can.

Two years ago Cote, a native of Auburn, and Cynthia Fisher, his partner in life and in business, bought Look's Cannery on the shore at the head of Holmes Bay in Whiting, a rural community in the far reaches of Washington County in Down East Maine. Founded in 1917 by William Look, the cannery had made its name turning out baby chopped clams, Indian pudding, and bottled clam juice.

By 2002, the cannery was managed by Look's last surviving son, Donald, then, seventy-eight years old, and had annual sales of around \$800,000. The cannery's seven remaining employees, down from a high of about forty in the early 1970s, included Donald's son and daughter. Look was ready to retire, and so he listed the cannery with a business brokerage in Portland.

"We had come up to Maine on vacation," Cote explains, "and I had a meeting scheduled with the same broker." Cote, now 50, had built a career in the premium food business, first with Pepperidge Farm and then with Odwalla, in Half Moon Bay, California, where he was a senior vice president. Among his other duties, he managed the Fresh Samantha line of fresh fruit juices, which had originated in Maine before being bought by Odwalla. "One day the company tapped me on the shoulder and said 'We're selling to Coca-Cola,'" he recalls. Six months after the merger, Cote decided to set off on his own.

Cote made two decisions. "I wanted to own my own company, and I wanted to move back to Maine," he recalls. When he described his background and his goals to the business broker, "he said you're not going to believe this, but this company just called us about selling," Cote says. He recognized the brand right away. "I knew this company from my childhood, growing up in Auburn," Cote explains. "I never thought I'd end up owning it."

In April 2003 Cote bought the business, which included Look's Cannery and three labels. The Atlantic brand had once been common in supermarkets all over the Northeast, while Bar Harbor was a boutique label for gift shops. Cap'n John had been used in Canada. One of his first moves was to change the name to Look's Gourmet Food Company. Within

eighteen months Cote and Fisher had expanded the line to thirty-eight products, from salmon bisque to the meat from a whole one-pound lobster.

Almost every product is made in the two-story wooden factory. "The only thing we don't make right here is the kippers," Fisher explains. "We buy smoked herring fillets from Canada and then pack them in five different sauces, including a mustard sauce made with Raye's mustard from Eastport."

Fisher says the company recently scored a coup when it placed twenty-six products with the Wild Oats natural foods supermarket chain. "We converted the brand to all-natural ingredients to meet the Wild Oats standards, which are the toughest in the country," Fisher explains. "This July our sales were up 50 percent over last July. We're convincing people you can get gourmet food in a can, but it's not easy."

In its day, canning was a miracle. In 1795, French general, emperor, and erstwhile world conqueror Napoleon Bonaparte, who famously declared that "an army marches on its stomach," offered 12,000 francs to anyone who could invent a new way to preserve food. Until then, food preservation was basically limited to salting, drying, or pickling. All three methods dramatically altered the fruit, vegetable, or meat being processed and often removed essential nutrients in the bargain.

Former candy maker and vintner Nicholas Appert developed a method for sealing food inside glass bottles and then heating them. The process worked -- Appert collected his reward from the Emperor himself in 1809 and promptly wrote a book about the experience -- but for the wrong reason. Appert thought that driving out all the air would prevent spoilage. It would be another half-century before Louis Pasteur showed that the culprit was bacteria and that canning worked by sterilizing the contents.

Napoleon tried to keep the process a secret from his enemies, but British spies were everywhere. By 1810 an English inventor had applied for a patent on a canning process that used an actual tin-plated steel can instead of bottles. By 1819 canned foods were being produced in New York City, and the industry moved quickly to Maine.

Details are vague about the date for the first cannery in Maine, but historians know the first lobster cannery opened in Eastport in 1842 or 1843. (Some food historians even claim that the Eastport canneries were the first in the nation to use tin cans.) Maine had been shipping live lobsters to southern New England for several decades in well smacks, sailboats whose hulls contained a tank, or well, through which seawater circulated. But the smacks could supply only a small portion of the market along the coast, and the process was laborious and expensive.

But canning brought the exotic to pantry shelves everywhere. By 1880 Maine had twenty-three lobster canneries, and more lobsters were leaving the state in cans than they were in shells. At the same time, companies such as Burnham and Morrill were setting up other canneries in small towns all over Maine to process farm-fresh food. "The canneries really did quite a lot to sustain farming in Maine," explains well-known food historian

Sandy Oliver, of Islesboro. "They kept farming profitable at a time when a lot of agricultural enterprises were moving west.

"There was a lot of debate in those days about farmers moving into higher value crops," Oliver continues. "Maine farmers were growing very high quality sweet corn, for example, in an almost artisanal style, harvesting ears individually as they ripened and whisking them to the cannery immediately."

In 1868, the Burnham and Morrill cannery in South Paris was the first in the nation to can corn successfully, and within a few years there were as many as nineteen corn canneries scattered throughout the state. Even tiny Wilton, near Farmington, had canneries for apples, beans, and corn. Declining lobster catches and increasing regulation spelled the end of the lobster canneries in the 1880s, but the plants shifted to herring, and in 1894 some fifty herring canneries in Maine were producing millions of tins of sardines each year.

"There were dozens and dozens of little canneries everywhere," Oliver notes. "It's strange that there isn't a lot known about them now, considering how important they were at the time."

Maine canneries thrived until the 1950s and the rise of frozen foods. By 2000, Maine had only two sardine canneries left (one has since closed) and the B&M Baked Bean plant in Portland, using beans from the Midwest. Look's was the last remaining old-line cannery in the state.

We're the only ones left," Cynthia Fisher muses. She understands the trends at work -- after all, canned foods too often have a reputation for being bland, overcooked, tasteless. The company's major job these days is convincing customers that "you can get gourmet food in a can," Fisher explains.

"When you put a product in a can, you have to overcome the idea that it's just an okay product," Cote notes. "That's the biggest challenge, getting people to understand what we've accomplished."

"Mike goes into sales meetings with three Thermoses full of our canned foods," Fisher says. "If he can get them to taste the food, they buy it. We go to trade shows and ladle up clam chowder and lobster straight from the can, and the one thing we hear is 'This came from a can?' At the Fancy Food Show in New York City this year we had Brazilian and Mexican companies come to us with orders. Just today we got an order from a culinary shop in Holland."

Jasper Wyman & Son, in nearby Cherryfield, ships 2.5-million pounds of Maine wild blueberries a year to Japan. Last year the Japanese buyers said they were looking for clam chowder to sell back home, and Wyman's executives sent them to Look's. "We ended up printing a bilingual Bar Harbor label and shipping a load of chowder off to Japan," Fisher explains. "Now they want baked beans and three other products."

These days Cote and Fisher are hiring more employees to increase their current staff of fifteen and talking about adding a second shift. They've rented warehouse space on the West Coast to accommodate their distribution out there. "Back in the old days you could find Maine-canned foods all over the country, even all over the world," Mike Cote says. "We think that can happen again."

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