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SOUP TO NUTS: *Meredith Goad*

Rod Mitchell and his Browne of Renown

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In its April issue, Coastal Living magazine names Portland's own Browne Trading Company as the second-best seafood market in the country.

The Commercial Street seafood purveyor, located on Merrill's Wharf, was second only to Seattle's Pike Place Fish Market on the magazine's list of "Top 10 Seafood Markets."

Rod Mitchell, founder of Browne Trading, doesn't seem to mind the runner-up status. After all, he notes with a perplexed look, fishmongers at Pike Place throw their fish across the room to each other to entertain customers.

If that's what it takes to be No. 1, he'll pass, thank you very much.

"They throw fish, which I really don't think is a good idea because it doesn't help the quality of the fish," Mitchell said.

It's Mitchell's passion for quality that has put Browne Trading on the map over the past 15 years and made him a legend in the seafood business.

He handles fish as if it will break, and moves it so fast that nothing stays in his market more than a day.

Mitchell is the man who put Maine diver scallops and peekytoe crab on restaurant menus. He trades in fish from all over the world - he estimates there are 50 to 75 different kinds of fish and shellfish in his establishment at any one time - and he has become the country's largest importer of farm-raised caviar.

Mitchell and his wife, Cynde, do business with restaurants all over the country and include on their client list celebrity chefs such as Eric Ripert, Charlie Trotter, Wolfgang Puck, Daniel Boulud and Emeril Lagasse.

Film director and wine maker Francis Ford Coppola orders caviar and fish from Browne, and is one of their



Staff photo by John Patriquin
Nicholas Branchina holds a fresh farm-raised Atlantic salmon at Browne Trading Company on Commercial Street.



Staff photo by John Patriquin
Kali-kali is among the dozens of species that pass through Browne Trading on any given day. Browne's cooler manager Chad McLoy is at work in the background.

loyal customers.

A few days ago, Mitchell gave me a behind-the-scenes tour of Browne Trading so I could see firsthand how the company operates. He also told me about some changes that are coming.

Two months ago, the market at Browne Trading quietly started offering soups and seafood-based sandwiches for lunch, and Mitchell now wants to add dinners to go.

This summer, the market will greatly expand its selection of produce, inviting local farmers to display goods on the storefront sidewalk.

It's the market that Portlanders see when they visit the Browne Trading building on Commercial Street. Here, locals can buy not only halibut from the North Atlantic and rope-grown mussels from Casco Bay, but also barramundi from Australia and loup de mer, a Mediterranean sea bass with delicate white flesh.

But the real action is in the 10,000 square feet behind the market, where fish cutters were hard at work on a recent weekday, packing sardines from Portugal.

"Fish is good up to 10 days, but we like to have it to chefs within three or four days, and in many cases the next day," Mitchell said, as we wandered among boxes being prepared for shipment. "We have fish coming from Portugal, New Zealand, Australia, France, Greece, Hawaii. Hawaii's great for us because we can fly against time."

Most of the product is shipped UPS Next Day Air, in insulated boxes that keep the temperature below 40 degrees. The company also sends two trucks of seafood a day to Boston.

In the back room, there is a fillet station for scaling and gutting, but "a lot of our chefs don't want the fish touched," Mitchell said. "They want it exactly the way it came out of the water, so they can see how fresh it is."

He pointed to some wild sea bass that just arrived from Portugal. "That's about \$25 a pound as it sits," he said.

"This is fresh mahi mahi," he said, pointing to another fish. "This just came from Hawaii. You can see it's still got the color, and it's all sashimi grade. That's why we cut the tails, to make sure it's clear meat. Here's a beautiful marlin that came out of Hawaii. This is Walu. Escolar, or oil fish, if you will. Very, very fatty. It will melt in your mouth."

That particular fish was bound for Le Bernardin, the four-star seafood restaurant in New York City presided over by chef Eric Ripert.

Next, we looked at fish still in the crates they'd arrived in, packed in shaved ice. A farm-raised black sea bass was still in rigor mortis, looking as if it froze while still swimming.

Today we almost take for granted the idea that fish brought to us in a fine restaurant will be fresh and undamaged, but it was Mitchell whose business practices led the way.

"I think the thing that Rod Mitchell really pioneered was really paying attention to the high level of quality," said Clark Frasier, one of the chef-owners of Arrows Restaurant in Ogunquit. "We have fabulous quality of seafood in our waters here in Maine, but they were not necessarily being treated, once they got on land, with the proper respect."



Staff photo by John Patriquin
Ken Meuse, smoke master at Browne Trading Company, prepares smoked salmon fillets for shipment.

Frasier said, for example, that the backbone of a salmon should always be kept straight during shipping. If it's put into a box that's too small, the fish curls and that breaks the flesh, which makes it deteriorate more rapidly.

"What was great about Browne Trading was you never had to worry," said Frasier, who was one of the company's earliest clients. "You would always get the most impeccable seafood available, and it would be brought to you in pristine condition. You didn't have to worry that it would be kept around in the back of a walk-in for a couple of days."

Restaurants aren't the only ones attracted to the freshness and variety of fish that comes into Browne Trading. Fish from around the world are displayed in the market every day for customers who come in off the street. Anything that doesn't sell in a day is shipped out to the wholesale market.

Mitchell said he has regular customers who drive up every week from Boston and Portsmouth to stock their refrigerators with a four-to-five day supply of fresh fish. The selection on any particular day might include onaga, a snapper from the South Pacific; John Dory from France or New Zealand, known for a distinctive black spot where St. Peter supposedly touched it; or wreckfish, a cousin of the grouper, that likes to hang out around shipwrecks.

Our next stop was the company's smoke room. Ken Meuse, the company's smoke master, was busy smoking some of Daniel Boulud's signature smoked salmon, using the chef's own recipe.

The cold-smoked salmon was in the last part of its cycle. The temperature on the smoker measured 81 degrees.

"It will only finish at that temperature, 80 to 87 degrees, for a very short period of time," Meuse said. "It helps bring oils to the surface, and it makes it have a real nice, shiny look to it when it's finished. For the most part, for several hours, it's 78 degrees."

Browne regularly produces three other types of cold-smoked salmon - citrus basil, made with citrus oil and vodka; Scotch-cured; and a new one made with Black Sea spice. Rainbow trout, scallops, and maple salmon are hot-smoked.

Mitchell asks Meuse to come up with three new recipes every year, whether they actually end up selling the smoked products or not.

"We've done a couple of gravlox recipes lately with fresh beets and orange slices," Meuse said.

The maple salmon is submerged upside down in pure maple syrup for two to three days before it is hot-smoked.

"The UPS guys drive up and down the street," Meuse said. "They knew when we were doing a maple smoke - they could smell it coming out of the smoke stack - and one of the drivers used to come in. Every time, he'd get it. He really had a nose for it. When it comes out of the smoke, it melts in your mouth."

Our last stop was the kitchen, where chef Jason Kennedy was making some fish cakes with opah, also known as moonfish, for a lunch entrée. Cajun-spiced shrimp wrapped in bacon were going into the oven.

Kennedy makes three soups every day for the new lunch menu, always including some kind of fish chowder.

Other recent menu items have included squid scampi, smoked trout sandwiches, a seared tuna sandwich with blue cheese, and a smoked pastrami salmon sandwich on rye.

"I'm excited to start offering more things," Mitchell said. "There's already a pretty good following here at lunchtime. We're trying to get people in the market to realize they can come here after work and buy something already prepared. We just started that, but we need more room. We're just scratching the surface of what we're going to do eventually."

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