

SAINTLY SALMON

FOOD & DRINK: ST JAMES SMOKEHOUSE



Brendan Maher, owner of St James Smokehouse, at its manufacturing base in Annan

'I always wanted St James to be in the same league as Aston Martin or Rolls Royce – to build a global brand with that level of class and quality.' Brendan Maher tells **Anne Armstrong** about the success of his Annan-based firm, St James Smokehouse, whose products have been enjoyed by the Queen and are sought-after all over the world

Photography by Jenny Woolgar



St James Smokehouse smoked site manager Kevin Murray – each salmon fillet is hand-cured before being naturally smoked

From humble beginnings in Dumfries & Galloway, St James Smokehouse has become a global success story. Based on a small industrial estate in Annan, a hard-working team produce premium quality salmon products which are a huge hit in America and are now becoming increasingly sought-after all over the world.

In under 10 years, St James has gone from employing four people to 70; developed products which have been enjoyed by the Queen and an American president, and won a host of national and international awards.

The firm was founded in 2003 by Brendan Maher and his wife Alexandra, and now has a sales office in Coconut Grove, Miami, as well as its manufacturing base in Annan's Station Road.

Originally from Liverpool, Brendan, a former graphic designer, had spent time in

the USA and realised there was a gap in the market for Scottish smoked salmon, after gaining experience working in the industry in Cumbria.

He says: "I lived in the USA for a while and what I found there was Chilean salmon being put in tartan bags and given a Scottish sounding name and sold as a Scottish product.

"I believed there was a definite need for a genuine Scottish salmon, salted and smoked by hand in Scotland, by Scottish people."

Brendan used his creative skills and spent months developing the St James brand. At first, production was outsourced to a number of small Scottish smokehouses, but a desire for more control of production and greater consistency of flavour meant a hunt for its own premises.

This led the firm to a pre-existing

facility in Newton Stewart and production started immediately under the watchful eye of master smoker Leo Sprott, who is still with St James today and is now site manager at Annan.

Interest in the products grew quickly and St James outgrew the Newton Stewart premises. It quickly snapped up a building previously owned by seafood firm Pinneys of Scotland in Annan, and celebrated five years on the site this September.

Brendan says: "We've never looked back since coming to Annan. It's a great town and there are a lot of people here who already have a knowledge of seafood and how to handle it because of their previous working experiences at Young's and Pinneys. Annan has been great for that.

"We've sponsored The Annan Harbour Action Group, The Royal Burgh of Annan Pipe Band and we're the main sponsor for ➤



Whole salmon ready to be processed; right: fresh fish intake chill processor Andrew Graham puts a salmon through the descaling machine; below: Ross Mackay and Logan Thomson de-heading the fish; edger Tommy Anderson and other workers removing the belly, bones and fay from the salmon



Annan Rugby Football Club for 2012/2013. I like to support local organisations to give something back to the community which has embraced and accepted us.”

St James sources only the finest sustainable Scottish salmon, and each fillet is hand-cured with a blend of pure sea salt and Demerara sugar, before being naturally smoked over oak chippings. Each smoked salmon fillet is fully trimmed by hand and vacuum-sealed to preserve the flavour. No artificial flavours or preservatives are used.

Award-winning St James Smokehouse Scotch Reserve Smoked Salmon is one of the firm’s bestselling products, and it has also had great success recently with smoked salmon infused with the likes of Whisky & Wild Honey, and Hendrick’s Scottish Gin and Tonic.

Brendan says: “We like to push the

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envelope with natural ingredients. We always try to use flavours which are harmonious with the salmon; complementing rather than overpowering the flavour of the smoked salmon.”

National and international awards

include numerous gold medals from the UK Guild of Fine Foods’ Great Taste Awards, and top business titles from the Scotland Food & Drink Excellence Awards, along with honours from the prestigious International Boston Seafood Show and Gulfood in Dubai.

While the domestic market is important to St James – locally, it supplies to restaurants including Smiths at Gretna Green, the Queensberry in Annan, and the Thin White Duke and Andalusian in Carlisle, and products can be bought at the Foodhall at the Famous Blacksmiths Shop visitor centre at Gretna Green – exporting abroad has been a driving force for the business.

Around 60 per cent of the firm’s exports currently go to North America, where Brendan lives with wife Alexandra and their four-year-old twins, Lennon and Grace, in Miami. He splits his working



Clockwise from above: production supervisor for fresh site Mary Johnstone checks the fish before Kieran Edwards weighs and boxes the fillets; Brendan with some St James Smokehouse products; smoked site manager Kevin Murray hand-salting fillets; Linda Linnett and Grant Legg remove bones from the salmon



time between Annan and the Coconut Grove office, where his 'right-hand man', global operations manager Andrew Potts, is also based.

While North America has been a top market for St James in recent years – its smoked salmon was served at a lunch attended by President George Bush and the Queen during an official visit to America – the firm has expanded into other territories such as Dubai, Egypt, Germany, Hong Kong, Portugal, Spain, Singapore and Thailand, and is looking to expand more in the months ahead.

Part of that growth this year has seen a £500,000 investment in the Annan premises, taking over an adjacent vacant building and transforming it into a filleting and portioning plant, which means it can handle whole fish for the first time and now offer fresh salmon products to the market.

'Our customers have faith and belief in the St James brand and now we hope to do the same with our fresh salmon'

Brendan says: "It's been a huge learning curve for us, but we're very happy with the end result and the new plant has been operational since the end of May.

"I had been looking at the growth potential by doing our own fresh fish and saw a pretty massive opportunity. We've developed quite a global presence for our

smoked products. Our customers have faith and belief in the St James brand and now we hope to do same with our fresh salmon."

St James is also keen to expand in the UK retail market and in November its newest product, The St James Smoked Salmon Trio, featuring smoked salmon infused with Whisky & Honey, Lemon & Pepper, and Gin & Tonic, went on sale in all Costco UK stores.

Reflecting on the firm's success to date, Brendan says: "When I started I wanted to give people the real deal. I always wanted St James to be in the same league as Aston Martin or Rolls Royce – to build a global brand with that level of class and quality.

"It's been challenging and a lot of hard work – but it's been immensely rewarding." D&G

■ See: www.stjamesmokehouse.com.