

Preserving Irish Smoked Salmon: Food Producers, Cultural Heritage, and Environmental Conservation

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ABSTRACT: Wild Atlantic salmon in Ireland have transformed over the centuries from a mythological figure to a luxury export, and today they have moved towards becoming national food heritage due to the efforts of food producers. This research argues that the bottom-up heritagization of smoked salmon by Irish smoked salmon producers is an integral piece in the movement to protect wild Atlantic salmon and their ecosystem. In designating them as heritage, Irish wild salmon moves from being a wild animal into a symbol of Ireland's coastal regions and an embodiment of traditional food practices, while projecting the fish's importance into the future. Wild Atlantic salmon face extinction from overfishing and environmental degradation, and while conservation efforts to protect wild salmon stocks have grown in recent years, smoked-salmon producers are left out of the conversation. In a growing food-tourism industry, smoked salmon producers in Ireland have become influential tastemakers who educate their customers about the fate of wild salmon, as well as provide data directly to scientists and policymakers, thus providing an essential through-line of communication. This research is based on a textual and visual analysis of the websites of several artisan smoked salmon producers in southwestern Ireland and demonstrates the role of food producers in constructing food heritage. This analysis is supported by ethnographic interviews that demonstrate their active role in salmon conservation.

Wild salmon catches the imagination in a way that is unmatched by any other fish. Steeped in mythology and nutritionally important from the Pacific coast of North America to the fjords of Norway, salmon today symbolizes the global movements for environmental and cultural conservation (Norgaard 2019; Lein 2015). In Ireland, the Atlantic salmon has long been recognized for far more than only sustenance. It plays a role in the mythology as the Salmon of Knowledge, and more recently was engraved into the coins of the Republic of Ireland.¹

The cultural significance of salmon has persevered, but as with salmon everywhere in the world, wild salmon in Ireland today is often spoken of in the same breath as impending extinction due to overfishing and environmental degradation. Efforts to conserve wild salmon stocks have been pushed forward over the past few years by environmentalists, politicians, and anglers, but the cultural significance of salmon as food is often left out of these conversations (Brennan and Rodwell 2008, 1076).

The exception to this is the relationship between cultural and environmental preservation that artisan Irish smoked-salmon producers draw upon to market their products. Yet, research into the conservation of wild salmon in Ireland does not account for the role of food producers, or for the way that through their efforts wild salmon is transformed from a disappearing species and source of food, into a product that sells Irish cultural heritage through traditional Irish food.

Small-scale smoked salmon producers are arguably the most acutely aware of this contradiction between the symbolic value of wild salmon and their physical survival. Due to increasing food tourism in Ireland (Quigley et. al 2019, 109), and their method of marketing smoked salmon as cultural heritage, the owners of these smokehouses have become intermediaries between wild salmon fishers, and the public. They use selective historical narratives about the fish, Irish cuisine, and the land and waters that the fish come from, to portray smoked salmon as cultural heritage.

This research explores the discursive construction of smoked salmon as Irish food heritage through the analysis of the online marketing for small-scale artisan smoked salmon Producers, and through ethnographic interviews with several of these producers who continue to use wild salmon in their products. The findings of this research open the question of what the potential for this influence can be, and questions if the designation of smoked salmon as heritage can be applied beyond economic growth, to bolster environmental conservation efforts.

Methodology

This research is based on a textual and visual analysis of the websites and online marketing of seven small-scale artisan fish smokehouses in southwestern Ireland that continue to use wild Atlantic salmon in their products. Semi-structured ethnographic interviews were also conducted with three of the owners of these smokehouses. At the request of the interviewees, the names of individuals will not be used.

Southwestern Ireland has a high density of fish smokehouses and salmon fishing. The region and its many rivers that flow into the Atlantic has been the home of wild salmon for over a millennium and has historically sustained an industry of smokehouses. More recently, there has also been a deliberate concentration of tourism initiatives, such as the Wild Atlantic Way, that have in turn bolstered the artisan food sector in this region (Quigley et. al. 2019,196).

This research also builds on literature from Irish scholars and recent research on Irish foodways, food

tourism initiatives, and Irish food history. There are no previous studies that take a qualitative approach to examining Irish wild salmon or Irish food heritage in a contemporary context, so a brief overview of heritage policy in Ireland as well as of the history of fishing policy is necessary. Limits to this research project are due to my inability to read Irish language sources and the impossibility of conducting any ethnographic work on-site due to the global pandemic.

This paper first provides a brief overview of the history of salmon in Ireland, as well as the broader context of recent Irish food scholarship, to provide insight into the unique aspects of food heritagization in Ireland with the goal of encouraging a broader conversation between food heritage and Irish food scholarship. It aims to highlight the role of food producers in the development of an Irish national cuisine, and the construction of food as heritage more broadly. This research specifically responds to a call by Irish food scholar, Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire for wider recognition of food as significant Irish intangible cultural heritage (2018b, 93), and that a celebration of Irish cuisine should be “championing Irish [food] producers” (2018a, 71). I investigate how these food producers use their business websites to define wild smoked salmon as cultural heritage by linking both the fish and the practice of smoking fish to the landscape, implying a historic continuity of both.

Finally, I explore how these producers play an integral but overlooked role in the environmental conservation of wild Atlantic salmon due to both their intergenerational relationship to wild salmon and their newfound role as cultural tastemakers.

Findings

Defining Food Heritage in Ireland

Heritage is a product and the result of an active process, that is constructed and defined often by governing bodies or institutions (Harrison 2013; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 369). Heritagization transforms smoked salmon from something that is functional into something that is as symbolic of the past as it is of our values in the present and future (Harrison 2013). Claims of food as heritage tend to be anchored just as much in history as they are in geography (Geyzen 2014, 68). In the case of this research, looking at the role of heritage in the marketing of Irish smoked salmon, heritage links the food temporally and geographically to Ireland.

Institutional designation and protection of heritage in the Republic of Ireland primarily occurs within the structures of the Heritage Council which was set up under the Heritage Act of 1995 but does not include any references to food as Irish cultural heritage (Heritage Act 1995). This designation of food heritage has been taken up amongst regional heritage organizations, tourism

initiatives, and in the case of smoked salmon, it has been claimed by smoked salmon producers with the support of bottom-up initiatives such as Slow Food Ireland (Boyden 2004). “The Presidium Protocol for Irish Smoked Wild Atlantic Salmon” is a document created by a group of smoked salmon producers who aim to not only protect wild salmon as a species but as a historically and culturally important product (Boyden 2004). The two issues here are intrinsically linked, and as the document states “there is no immediate fear that the discipline and method of their craft will disappear in the foreseeable future. However, this is in contrast with the status of the wild resource upon which they depend” (Boyden 2004, 3). These two, the wild salmon and the practice of smoking it, are evidently deeply intertwined in the view of these producers.

The story of Irish salmon encapsulates the relationship between the Irish and their land over the past several centuries. Because of centuries of British colonization and their total control of food sources in Ireland, including seafood, the Irish have a fraught relationship with seafood today (Kurlansky 2020, 104; Sexton 1998, 14). The colonization of Ireland perpetuated the idea that the island was a desolate wilderness in need of taming through agriculture (Montaño 2011). Over the centuries, the supposed wilderness and the depleted food sources that could be foraged and fished from the Irish land and seascapes were looked down upon by the British and even eventually by the Irish themselves. While most Irish-produced foods were being exported, the poorer Irish population was left to consume what was not considered export-quality, such as shellfish which became synonymous with “poor man’s food” (Mac Con Iomaire 2004, 1). Irish food scholars have undertaken the arduous task of undoing the widespread narrative that Ireland has always been a country of scarcity and that historical diets were limited to an unappetizing handful of ingredients and argue that Ireland has a food history of note (Breen 2016, 91; Sexton 1998; Mac Con Iomaire 2004, 61). Irish food historian, Regina Sexton, wrote in her short but monumental book *A Little History of Irish Food* that there is a persistent narrative that the Irish have not historically consumed seafood, and that this idea comes at least in part because of the way that archives often exclude the lower classes and their diets, which in fact consisted of large quantities of seafood (1998). Contrary to the perception of other seafood, salmon has always been considered a valuable food source in Ireland. This is primarily due to its symbolic significance, and because it was exported in large quantities by the British, which transformed it into a luxury item (Mac Con Iomaire 2004, 66). Despite its inaccessibility to the masses, it remained symbolically the King of Fish over the centuries, an image that has helped it return to Irish dinner plates (Mac Con Iomaire 2004, 63).

In the 20th century the Irish government took up the challenge of turning locally produced food from a point of shame to one of pride for the Irish people. In recent years Irish chefs and food scholars are working to undo this

stigma and create a new Irish cuisine (Deleuze 2014, 144; Mac Con Iomaire 2018a, 59). The role of food producers in this process, however, is understudied.

Severe fishing restrictions were imposed in 2006 in response to plummeting salmon stocks, and today only a few Irish fishers are still granted licenses for Irish waters, to practice a small-scale and traditional method of fishing called draft-net fishing (Kurlansky 2020). The few who choose to still make a living off these scarce fish often sell directly to local smokehouses as their only consistent market (Kurlansky 2020). The growing food tourism industry in Ireland, and the position of the smokehouse owners as artisan food producers within this market, have elevated them to the status of tastemakers, and added value to their product through selecting and re-crafting historical narratives (Parasecoli and Halawa 2019).

Homepage Heritage: Wild Salmon and the Wild Coast

While only a handful of smokehouses still produce wild Atlantic smoked salmon in Ireland, the mythological and historical narratives, of both the fish itself and the way that wild salmon is caught, are used in the marketing of all smoked salmon producers. The geographic origin of their products is evidently important to customers as it is often prominently displayed on the websites for these businesses, either visually or through text. For instance, the homepage of Connemara Smokehouse displays the words “Finest Traditionally-Smoked Wild Atlantic Seafood” across a looping video that cuts between rugged coastline, fishing boats at sea, and a pair of hands carefully working with color-saturated salmon on drying racks (Connemara, n.d.). These images alone draw a strong connection between the coastal landscape, the hands of the producers, and the distinctly salmon-colored fish, despite wild salmon making up only a small fraction of their product. The websites serve as online marketing of products and services provided by the businesses. Therefore, any historical, or otherwise educational information about the region and environment aids in the marketing of their products. In addition, these platforms are often viewed by tourists, either from outside of Ireland or from other parts of Ireland, who may visit the smokehouses on a trip to the west coast of Ireland. In a brief description on the homepage of Ballyhack Smokehouse, after noting their location, it states: “Whilst we specialise in a number of different smoked products, our premium cold smoked salmon is our most popular” (Ballyhack Smokehouse, n.d.). This usage of wild salmon allows for an easy visual and discursive connection between place and product. A prominent display of farmed salmon or less romanticized species of fish would perhaps not speak as clearly to the desire to link history, landscape, and food in their marketing.

Terms such as “wild” and “rugged” are common throughout the smokehouse websites, romanticizing the wildness and ruggedness of the coastline, and implying an idea of untouched natural beauty that is home to these smokehouses. The connection between the practice of

smoking salmon and the wild nature that the fish come from is very clear, as seen in a quote from Belvelly Smokehouse, attributed directly to the owner and under the heading “Ireland the Seafood Island.” It reads: “You can’t separate the artisan food business in Ireland from our geography [...] our landscape is at the heart of what we create” (Belvelly Smokehouse, n.d.). The process of heritagization here is tying the fish not to national borders, but rather to the very specific waters, rocks, estuaries, and bays where these businesses are situated.

The relationship between heritage and geography is often cited as nationalistic or wrongfully exclusionary based on the transient history of all foodways (Porciani and Montanari 2019), and the claims to the Irish coast and coastal food products as Irish heritage are no exception. Comparisons are sometimes drawn between processes, such as cold-smoked salmon being attributed to Irish traditions compared to Scandinavian practices of hot-smoking, but the deliberate and consistent references to the ruggedness and wildness of Ireland’s western coast point to something more specific in this region of Ireland. While claiming the cold-smoking process as traditional to Ireland and therefore rooting it in historic continuity, the emphasis on centering the landscape of Ireland as a point of pride is working to re-invent the historical narrative that the Irish have been put under since the early years of English conquest. To have pride in their landscape is to have pride in their identity, and to consume food that comes from that landscape – especially food that is claimed as traditionally sourced and produced – is not actually indicative of historical continuity of practice, but instead is a re-invention of a food as heritage. This reinvention within the “circuits of heritagization” is, as Grasseni writes, a “means of local development” as well as a means of reclaiming an aspect of history that seemed to have slipped from the control of Irish hands in the previous few centuries (2011, 1).

Farmed into Wild

Scholarly literature on the construction of heritage often points to the frequency with which historian Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of ‘invented tradition’ is used by parties to claim a historical narrative may not have occurred in the way its recounted today (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In the case of these smokehouses, reinvention is not about the rediscovery of a practice of production, but rather reinventing key aspects of it to adapt to economic, political, and social changes. Adaptability is central to the very definition of intangible cultural heritage that food and food practices fall under, according to the institutional definition set by UNESCO (2003). In many cases, this allows for changes to ingredients and practices across time as well as space due to changing habits of the people whose food it is, or the accessibility of ingredients. Perhaps the most important change, or reinvention, that the smoked salmon producers in Ireland have undergone is the loss of the wild salmon as a key ingredient that ties them not only to history but to geography.

Wild salmon still functions within their business in two ways. The first is the persistent use of the imagery and narrative of wild salmon in their overall marketing, and the second is that the scarcity of wild salmon adds to the economic value of the products created with it. The price for 200g (7oz) of wild salmon hovers around €50 (\$60), and it's quite common for wild salmon to be sold out due to the small quantities available and the short fishing season². Therefore, motivated in one part because of economic necessity and another in the name of 'saving wild salmon,' all but one smokehouse has turned source primarily farmed salmon. Their websites promote farmed salmon, and specifically the organic farmed salmon that Ireland primarily produces, as a natural alternative to wild salmon in their final product. However, through examining the discourse around farmed salmon, both on the smokehouse websites and through interviews with producers, the inclusion of farmed salmon within the artisan smoked-salmon market raises interesting questions about the limits and adaptability of smoked salmon as cultural heritage.

The narrative around wild salmon is not only about the relationship to the landscape, the rivers, and the open Atlantic Ocean west of Ireland. It is also about the fishers who fish the salmon, and the tradition of fishing these wild fish. This romantic image does not translate as well to salmon raised in pens, who have never swum deep into the unknown and returned, almost magically, to swim up the Irish rivers, to then be caught by men who have learned the trade from their grandfathers. However, for these small-scale smokehouses that have built their branding off tradition and collective Irish history, finding a way to draw a compelling connection between wild and farmed to continue to market their value-added smoked product as heritage, is necessary for economic survival.

This appears to be possible because of the specific conditions under which farmed salmon in Ireland are raised, namely that they are almost completely certified organic farmed salmon (Bord Bia 2018). The nuances of what this labeling means and the policy that surrounds this type of certification are beyond the scope of this research, but one piece that is essential in drawing the parallel between wild and farmed smoked salmon is the quality and quantity of the water that they swim in. The certified organic farmed salmon that all the smokehouses use have swum roughly the same distance in their life as a wild salmon, in the waters of the Atlantic, albeit in a penned in space (Bord Bia 2018). The importance of this was clear throughout the interviews with producers, in which they each insisted that besides the location of production, the quality of the water where the salmon is caught creates the unique taste of their products, and the muscle built from swimming in those specific currents gives the salmon a distinct texture. While the cleanliness and quality of this water are in fact quantifiable (EPA 2021; Bord Bia 2018), the language that they use evokes this connection between the geography and the salmon through sensory taste, or *terroir*.

The heritagization of smoked salmon here also links time and space to sensory taste, which is attributed to the cleanliness and wildness of the rivers and coastal waters surrounding water for both wild and organic farmed Atlantic salmon. But what happens when that water becomes too polluted? Despite being some of the cleanest marine areas in the EU, the trends of pollution in the rivers continue to increase (EPA 2021). This research takes the scholarly discussion that links taste and heritage a step further by integrating the issue of environmental degradation, which has been rapidly increasing in recent centuries due to the forces of industrialization, colonization, and globalization of our foodways. This is also the motivating force behind the rising interest in protecting national and *global heritage* (Belasco 2016). The idea that the sensory taste of our food is linked to the origins of that food, known as *terroir*, is perhaps best described by food scholars such as Amy Trubek (2008) and elaborated on in relation to heritage discourse by food scholar, Warren Belasco, who notes that *terroir* means having pride in a place, which then "becomes an instrument of local environmental, economic, and cultural regeneration" (Belasco 2016, 40). This relationship between food and place is constructed (Parasecoli 2017), and despite what those intimately familiar with the differences between wild and farmed salmon might claim, the physiological taste itself is subjective and must be communicated to be a shared experience. The idea that the waters of Ireland give the country's salmon a distinct taste and texture is made legitimate through the discourse on the business websites. It claims that *terroir* is a through-line between both wild salmon and farmed salmon and between Ireland's ancient past and future.

Despite government led-efforts to create fish hatcheries in Ireland under the pretense that they are environmentally sound and even beneficial, hatcheries and fish farms around the world are coming under increasing scrutiny for their claims of sustainability and the reality that they are in fact depleting wild salmon stocks even more (Kurlansky 2020; Murphy 2019).

The smokehouse websites often justify their reasoning to use farmed salmon as an alternative to wild in terms of conservation and environmental sustainability. While the emphasis varies, environmental concern for wild salmon is used as a marketing tool for their products across all the businesses assessed in this research.

Today, only one smokehouse in southwestern Ireland continues to use exclusively wild fish. Woodcock Smokery, owned by Sally Barnes, views selling smoked wild fish as advocacy for the conservation of the species. Barnes speaks at events around the world and teaches classes about the history and ecosystem of Ireland's coast. On the website for Woodcock Smokery, Barnes writes: "I have seen the decline of fish stocks going hand in hand with a distortion of our cultural food heritage" (Woodcock Smokery, "The Keep"). On a page titled "Why Work with Wild?" Barnes writes of the many pollutants and land-management practices that

have led to the decline in salmon stocks before mentioning a 10,000-year-old “tradition of engaging with wild salmon for food” (Barnes, “Why Work with Wild?”). She draws on this history to illustrate the intertwined fates of humans and wild species, writing: “Rehabilitate the entire watercourses and catchments in Ireland to make the habitat for our remaining wild fish suitable for them to reproduce in and continue their survival with us” (Barnes, “Why Work with Wild?”). Barnes uses her business, from her website to her classes, as well as her status in the wider community as an expert on the topic, to advocate for the protection of wild salmon. In using wild fish for her products, she supports the local fishers who catch them and deliberately avoids using farmed fish that she believes are detrimental to wild fish populations.³ More importantly, her practice opens a line of conversation with her customers who may never otherwise interact with the issues facing wild salmon and their ecosystems.

Each of the producers interviewed in this research referenced working directly with governmental organizations and scientists with whom the producers share their knowledge about salmon health and conservation. One smokehouse owner told the story of how he was once fileting salmon and upon cutting it open found small crabs in its intestine. He said:

There [were] a few things that were unusual about that. First of all, the salmon, when they're coming back to the river, they stopped feeding a couple weeks beforehand, so you would never find food in their gut. And the second thing was, usually when they feed, they feed up in the in the waters, so not down on the bottom. And so, I contacted my guy in the Marine Institute [...] And the funny thing was, as well, the crabs that were in the guts were a very rare type of crab [that] we found in certain places. So, we're able to actually pinpoint exactly where the fish ate. And the conclusion that they came to was, because the fish were struggling to find food at sea, in the normal manner that they would, they had broken the pattern [...] All of these things are useful tools and useful information in terms of helping understand what's going on.⁴

This story touches on several key points that came up throughout the other interviews, that indicate the ways that their role as food producers connects them to the larger network of salmon conservation. As a smoker who has been working with salmon his whole life and is actively touching and working with salmon every single day, he not only has intimate knowledge of the life cycles of the salmon but sees in real-time the status of their health which reflects their environment. He has a relationship with a scientist who works in marine conservation and can use his knowledge to enhance their work. The last piece is a recognition of the importance of this information, not only for his own benefit as someone who needs healthy fish to

sell, but also that the salmon in his hands is part of a much larger system at play beneath the ocean's surface.

This knowledge may be found equally among the fishers who fish these salmon and perhaps eat them themselves, and there are of course other institutions, scientists, and even the angler community who promote salmon conservation for the sake of the angling-tourism industry. However, there are few people in Ireland who interact with wild salmon as close to the source where they are fished, and in such high quantities, as the smoked salmon producers in southwestern Ireland. What sets them apart from the others perhaps most of all is their position as mediators between the fishers, the salmon themselves, and the public. They have leveraged the heritage discourse around their practice, their product, and their identity as a business to gain this status.

Conclusion

There is arguably no other finned fish that tells the story of Ireland from its ancient Gaelic roots through colonial control, to its status within the European Union, as well as salmon. A closer look at the way salmon is turned into food in the smokehouse represents how the Irish are transforming their future through narratives of their past and defining food heritage. Wild salmon, while becoming better known for its symbolic meaning than for the taste of their flesh, is still central to the economic livelihoods of many coastal communities.

The Irish smokehouse websites analyzed in this research reinvent heritage within their social, geographic, and economic context. They use the taste, or *terroir*, of Irish waters to create continuity between wild and farmed salmon, therefore creating a narrative of historical continuity in their practice which adds value to their product. While some justify that the traditional smoking practices can easily be transferred from working with Atlantic wild salmon to farmed organic salmon, this is contingent on the continuation of sourcing from Irish waters to indicate historical continuity. However, if wild salmon do disappear from Irish waters, the strength of this narrative and the future of smoked salmon producers as tastemakers linking the past to the future through smoked salmon, becomes unclear. In addition, the link between the wild salmon and the public that producers and fishers currently create would disappear, thereby creating a gap in the data that could aid in their conservation.

As wild salmon moves from the hands of Irish fishers into the hands of the few remaining smokehouses that process them, they are transformed from a wild animal into a symbol of cultural heritage. Transforming raw flesh into smoked meat elicits the fresh waters of Ireland and the ancient practice of smoking fish, adding value to them culturally and economically. Wild Irish salmon move up a notch on the ladder of Irish cuisine through this process, and in doing so, smoked salmon producers are working towards securing wild Irish salmon in the future of Ireland.

Notes

1. While the terms “Ireland” and “Irish” will be used throughout this paper, this research is exclusively focused on the Republic of Ireland.
2. These prices were estimated at the time the research was conducted, in May 2021.
3. Sally Barnes (owner of Woodcock Smokery), in an interview with the author, March 2021.
4. Interview with a smokehouse owner, March 10, 2021. Name of the interviewee withheld at their request.

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