

Independent and happy

This article describes the life and work of a woman fish smoker in Ireland's artisanal fishery

Adapted from an account by **Sally Barnes** (sally@woodcocks.mokery.com) at www.woodcocks.mokery.com

Sally Barnes runs an artisanal fish smoking business in a coastal town in West Cork in southern Ireland. The Woodcock Smokery, Sally's enterprise, has an enviable reputation, winning prestigious awards over almost 40 years. But now, after all these years, since the cold of the workshop is making her hands ache some nights, Sally is toying with the idea of selling her business, and moving to sharing what she knows with others. It's okay to dream, Sally tells herself.

Although she is single now, Sally used to be married to an inshore fisherman. They had two children. Like many fisher wives, Sally, for all practical purposes, was a 'single parent' to the children, the 'at home' wife assisting with the fishing business, finding buyers, ordering parts, running the household, with never enough cash to manage expenditure. Her ex-husband tried different kinds of fishing: tangle nets inshore for spiny lobsters, turbot, and other whitefish, salmon, and nephrops prawns. For some years, he helped establish an offshore fishery for hake, travelling up to 80 km out from the shore.

While the family had the freshest fish (though prices were poor), they were too far from urban life for Sally to find employment. In any case, the demands of domestic work made leaving home impossible. Then, Sally and her husband incurred a bad debt—a client didn't pay for their wild salmon. After two years

of waiting, they were forced to take him to court. The man offered them a smoking kiln as part payment.

After much trial and error, Sally taught herself to use the kiln and began selling the products. Some help came from the government towards the costs for refurbishing a shed for fish processing. Sally took a loan to invest in certain assets: a chill-room, a vacuum-packing machine, sinks and tables. She borrowed again to buy stocks for smoking. Through the smoking business, Sally added value to her husband's catches and increased the family income. During many winters, it was the sole income—for example, when bad weather made fishing impossible.

Slowly, Sally gained a sense of financial independence. She enrolled at the Open University and took courses in food production and oceanography. She had already instinctively developed methodologies to increase the shelf life of fish, a highly perishable commodity, and these courses augmented the knowledge she gained. By nature, Sally was a 'sustainable' entrepreneur, buying not too much but just enough fish to keep busy and enjoy a good life.

One year, a friend introduced Sally to AKTEA (European Women in Fisheries Network). Soon she began participating in AKTEA events, meeting women who were truly inspirational. Some had lived and worked in remote coastal communities just like she had. These women gave her enormous encouragement in her personal and business life. She realized that she was not alone in her desire to see women's lives, as partners or wives of fishermen, improve, and be acknowledged as vital components in the whole fishing enterprise.

Today, as a member of the Artisan Working Group in Ireland, Sally regularly meets the Food Safety Authority in Dublin to discuss regulatory changes that may affect the local artisan sector, which employs many self-employed women. Says Sally, "Big Business tends to be well-represented at the EU level but small artisans are not. The implications for all our foods and how they are prepared, and good health in human populations, must not be allowed to rest in the hands of huge businesses. Artisans are more concerned with integrity and clean food, which we are proud to put on our own tables. A little profit for our efforts is not the sole reason for engaging in this work. But it helps!"

Some years ago, one of Sally's customers, who was going to the food festival Salone del Gusto, organized in Italy by Slow Food, invited Sally to come along too. This was the

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start of a long enchantment with Slow Food, and Slow Fish in particular. Despite the occasional blip, the relationship with Slow Food has been extremely rewarding.

Among Sally's many interests is a deep love for knowledge—both learning new things and teaching what she knows. For many years, interns from Slow Food's University of Gastronomic Sciences have been coming to Sally to learn about preserving fish proteins with salt and smoke, and other aspects of the science behind fish processing.

The involvement with Slow Food led Sally to meet a person named Kamal Mouzawak, who was responsible for initiating the first 'Farmer's Market' in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2005. Through this effort, local producers were able to reach the urban consumer who was eager to find good, clean and fair priced foods. Every day, rural women would come to the city to prepare traditional Lebanese dishes for customers who had signed up for lunch. Based on traditional recipes, these dishes varied from one village to the next. Through several restaurants set up over the years, women in war-torn Lebanon were being able to earn their own incomes.

Kamal Mouzawak invited Sally to visit his country, and so, in 2014, along with two chef friends, Sally travelled to Beirut to demonstrate artisanal fish-smoking to three groups of women, primarily war-widows from Tripoli in Northern Lebanon and refugees from Syria. The women studied all aspects of food production, food safety, pricing and costing,

with the ultimate goal of making and selling nutritious foods available to consumers. The relationship with the Lebanese women however didn't start off quite as smoothly as Sally had desired.

The demonstration began with Kamal Mouzawak describing what Sally's session would involve. The moment he mentioned that the fish would be cooked in smoke, every single woman turned and walked away! Probably, they thought that the foreigner was planning to burn all the flavour out of their fine fish. Although alarmed at losing her audience so quickly, Sally continued her preparations, and soon, when the fish was smoke-cooked, Kamal invited the women for a taste. The fish disappeared so fast that Sally herself didn't get a chance to try any. Afterwards, the women expressed their appreciation through a moving ululation, which brought tears of joy to her eyes.

Sally believes she has led a full life and has everything she requires: "I have a roof over my head, food in my belly, a dry and safe bed, and clean water to drink. What else does anybody truly need?" If there's anything she looks forward to, it is the opportunity to teach fisherwomen around the world how to make fish last longer and taste delicious at the same time. Says Sally, "This will take the pressure off having to sell fresh fish as rapidly as possible, sometimes even at low prices, if necessary, before it spoils, and it will allow homemakers to gain some financial independence as well!"

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