



# EUROFISH MAGAZINE



## Italy

**Bivalves dominate aquaculture production**



**Trout** conference hears of Romanian success



**Aquaculture:** Biofilters, the heart of recirculation systems



**Trade:** Seafood is increasingly flown to its destination

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A passion for trout

# Farming and smoking trout in the mountains

Creating a new image for trout and developing a market for smoked trout products has been part of Friultrota di Pighin's mission. Catering for an exclusive clientele, the company has created a substantial niche for itself.

**O**ur core business is trout. It's our history, or origin, and our passion, says Mauro Pighin. The company that he heads, Friultrota di Pighin S.R.L., was the first in Italy to produce smoked trout products. When the company started 30 years ago, trout was only sold whole in Italy, not even gutted. When customers bought it, they had to slaughter it at home, he recalls.

The family was originally in the excavation business. While excavating at a lake, they put a few thousand smolts in the water. After several years, they discovered that they had several thousand trout, each weighing between 4 and 8 kg, and some even up to 13 kg.

The question was, what to do with all this fish? The family started to cook them for itself and have barbecues with friends. The trout continued to grow, and so the Pighins started to smoke it with the help of friends, because they had no experience with the process. Of course, it was not economically sustainable; it was just a hobby that did not have to be financially viable.

## Changing minds about trout

Gradually, the Pighins learned about trout. The company started making cold-smoked trout and then hot-smoked trout, its first

two products, and the company's mainstay even today. Later, other products were added. At the time, their work was met with scepticism. Smoked salmon was considered a superior product, and the feeling in the industry was that it was useless to try to change consumer perception. They met with resistance when they tried to sell their trout at the same price as salmon, which was more expensive than it is now. But quitting was not an option for them. "You see, in Friuli we are very stubborn. If we believe in something, we keep trying until it works. In the first four or five years, it was hard because we had to put money into the company, but we persisted. After 30 years, I can say that it was worth the effort. Now, if we conduct blind tests comparing our trout with the salmon available in shops and supermarkets, nine out of ten prefer the trout", he says, with satisfaction.

## An exclusive customer base

The company sells its products mostly in high-end shops, delicatessens, and restaurants. The target customer is one who appreciates higher quality and is willing to pay for it. Mr Pighin points out that, as a result of the recent financial crisis, many delicatessens and small shops had to close, forcing the company to sell



Mauro Pighin, the owner of Friultrota, a purveyor of processed trout and other seafood products for an exclusive clientele.

a small part of their production in a few Italian supermarkets under a different brand name. We are not organised to offer low prices or a product for the masses, he says, nor are we interested in competing with large producers of smoked fish, for example, in Poland, Estonia, or Turkey. Generally, the products are not available throughout Italy, but are available in large cities, including Milan, Turin, Florence, Bologna, and Rome. According to Mauro Pighin, 75% of the company's distribution occurs north of Rome, although a distributor has begun working in the south.

## Not limited to trout

In addition to cold- and hot-smoked trout and salmon, the

company also produces sea bream, Atlantic mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*), tuna (*Thunnus albacares*), swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*), seabass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*), and herring (*Clupea harengus*). Smoked herring has been part of the region's tradition since the Middle Ages, when it was eaten during Lent. Traditionally, the herring was very salty with a strong flavour. At Friultrota the traditional recipe was altered by reducing the amount of salt and using lighter smoke to process the raw material, which is imported from Scotland and Norway.

Removing pin bones in salmon by machine presents no problem. In the small trout, half the pin bones can be removed by machine. The meat's firmness and low fat content, however, require that the





rest be removed by hand. In the case of large trout fillets all the pinbones are removed manually, which is an expensive process, but one the customers appreciate.

At the beginning, just to prove the trout's quality and change the public's perception of it, the company started producing trout cheeks. "We did it just to say, this is different from what you think about trout. It's very expensive because you get two from each trout and you have to remove them by hand. But the demand from restaurants was great, so we have continued to produce them".

### **The right amount of smoke**

Mr Pighin emphasises that smoking must enhance the fish's

flavour, not cover it. He prefers a much lighter smoking than is common in northern Europe, for example. He aims to make the smoke flavour nearly unnoticeable. When a customer can't tell whether it is smoked or not, it is the right level, he says. When the smoke is too strong, maybe you are hiding something.

Hot-smoking is done at temperatures of 80-90°C, smoking and cooking the fish at the same time. Cold smoking is done at less than 27 °C, which takes longer. Smoke is generated by the flameless combustion of whitewood sawdust or shavings. To these are added various aromatic berries and herbs, which determine the products' different flavours and aromas. There are no precise formulas. According to Mr Pighin these methods call for

extreme care, sensitivity, and lots of experience. Other products are marinated in the zest of orange, lemon, and lime, and steam cooked, without pin bones. Apart from smoking trout the company also smokes salmon which comes mostly from Scotland, with a small amount from Norway and some frozen wild red king and sockeye from Alaska.

### **Fish farming in the mountains**

The company is the only producer of fish in the small village of San Daniele. There are three other processors in the Friuli region, but their areas of expertise are mainly in fresh or frozen fillets and fish hamburger for cooking. The Friuli region, however, with about 50 fish farms produces a third of the national production of

live trout. Farming fish in the mountains has the advantage of access to plenty of good water. The region has numerous rivers with clean water, and there is plenty of precipitation. There are underground sources of clean, fresh water all year round with a constant temperature of 15 °C. Cold water is ideal for trout as it makes for firmer meat. The company uses high quality feeds and allows for slow growth, because it does not need to fatten the fish. According to Mr Pighin, fat is waste. The fat content of the fish depends on the quality and quantity of feed. The company used to produce its own but was forced to stop after the outbreak of mad cow disease. They used the waste from their production, adding fishmeal and fishoil, which allowed them to control the entire production. As Friultrota is trying to produce





The total production of finished items amounts to about 150 tonnes.

lean fish, that must be reflected in the choice of feed. The fish should have good, firm meat, not fat and to achieve this the company needs the same patience that they need for producing ham.

San Daniele is famous for the production of ham, which began to have an economic impact in the 1920s. Today, San Daniele is a destination for tourists eager to sample its ham. For Friultrota it was helpful because many people came to San Daniele to taste and buy the ham. Magazines and national television also came, and they discovered the other thing in San Daniele - trout.

### Sourcing the raw material

The company has its own fish farm, and they cooperate with other farmers in Friuli and in the region, who produce raw

material with the required quality. They buy both whole, gutted fish and fresh fillets. Mr Pighin emphasises that the company does not buy just any raw material, but only from producers with whom there is an agreement on the standard of quality. The average density of fish in the raceways in Friuli is approximately 15 kilos per cubic metre, which is low, and is a main contributing factor to quality, says Mr Pighin. Some farmers allow a density of 50-60 kilos per cubic metre.

### Education is the key to the future

Local people visit the shop. Above all, it's important to have customer feedback, feels Mr Pighin. The company holds cooking classes, dining events, and information sessions. Chefs are invited to give demonstrations and to invent



Vacuum packaged smoked fillets are placed in a glossy covering that conveys the exclusivity of the product.

recipes with the company's products. People come here to get ideas about how to use the products. Of course, they are all ready to eat, but they can be used in different recipes, says Mr Pighin. Friultrota cooperates with schools and holds information sessions with students to explain the importance of what they eat and the origin of the raw material, how and why it's done their way compared with the industrial product, and the importance of local production in terms of environmental impact. The flow of information is, however, not one way, as the company also learns from the young people.

### Creativity in new products

Pighin admits that in the company they have more ideas than time. New products are being developed, which require planning,

tasting, testing, and so on. But it's a good thing. The interesting part of the work is the creativity.

Mr Pighin has other things in mind, with other species too, but just to attract a wider range of customers. At the beginning, he had to add other fish - salmon, herring, and others - and would say, "I can give you seabass, seabream, and so on if you want, but at least try the trout." When the customers tasted it, they changed their minds.

Currently, about 90% of the production is sold in Italy, but Mr Pighin is considering export opportunities. We are looking for chances to expand, to see where we can go and what we can do, just to have more possibilities, he says. At the moment, we don't need it, but it is a strategy for the future.

*William Anthony*

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**Owner:** Mauro Pighin

**Activity:** Trout farming and processing; seafood processing

**Products:** Ready-to-eat cold- and hot-smoked and marinated trout, salmon, seabream, Atlantic mackerel, tuna, swordfish, seabass, herring, trout roe

**Volumes:** Approximately 150 tonnes of finished products

**Markets:** High-end shops, delicatessens, and restaurants mostly in northern Italy