

COMPANY PROFILE

CATSMO ARTISAN SMOKEHOUSE | BY TAYLOR DOWD

A GOURMET VISION

CATSMO OFFERS STATE-OF-THE-ART TASTE



Catsmo Artisan Smokehouse (Catsmo) was born from a passionate fisherman, Robert Simon whose abundance of salmon from fishing trips led him to create groundbreaking smoking techniques and recipes. Fine food purveyor, Markus Draxler, owner of SOLEX Fine Foods (SOLEX) joined forces with Catsmo with a vision in mind: to provide the best and freshest products to chefs and consumers. Draxler leads the company as Owner/CEO, making massive strides in creating a retail market and developing Catsmo's state-of-the-art production facility in Wallkill. With the expertise and guidance of Simon and his brother-in-law, Sebastian Theate, Draxler and his team have made a name for Catsmo's unsurpassable salmon, caviar, and other gourmet products. And there's no telling where the limit for their growth is.

"We have a product that we buy fresh, smoke fresh, and sell fresh. The recipe we have and how we treat the fish gives you this nice silky texture, which some other smokehouses don't have."



Catsmo uses fruitwood like apple and cherry in their smoking process.

CATSMO'S HISTORY & PROGRESSION

Catsmo was founded in 1994 by Robert Simon, an avid fisherman who started smoking his own catch in his garage when he would have an overabundance of fish from his fishing trips. Simon shared his smoked salmon with friends—many of whom were chefs in New York City—and they began requesting that he produce smoked salmon for them to add to their restaurant menus. Other chefs enjoyed the fish and encouraged Simon to set up shop to begin selling it to more restaurants and private clubs. Over time, Simon perfected his techniques, improved his recipes, and grew his business, eventually moving up from smoking fish in his garage at home to purchasing the plot of land where the Wallkill smokehouse facility stands in 1997. Simon grew up in Belgium, and with the help of his stepbrother, Sebastian Theate, he continued to build the business. Today, Theate is still Vice President of Catsmo, and runs day-to-day production and is in charge of the smoking process.

For many of its early years, Catsmo focused mainly on servicing hotels, restaurants, and catering companies, but did very little in retail. In 2015, Draxler saw the potential for Catsmo to develop its retail presence, and eventually landed the opportunity to work with several large-scale food retailers. Partnering with your favorite grocers is no easy feat, however. Draxler explains the time commitment and challenge of the beginning stages of the process. “For years I would have to drive to Wegmans to make presentations,” he said. “I left my house at 5:30 a.m. for an 11:30 meeting that lasted half an hour then I drove back home.” It took five years before Draxler was able to get Catsmo’s products in their stores.

“We’re fortunate that we’ve worked with other retailers in New York State mostly, but also in the northeast area,” said Draxler. Whole Foods, Wegmans, and Williams-Sonoma are just a few retail giants where Catsmo’s products are sold. Catsmo services fine dining

restaurants in NYC and beyond. Because Catsmo’s smokehouse is based in Wallkill, Draxler likes to have a local presence; Hudson Valleyites can purchase Catsmo’s products at Adam’s Fairacre Farms, Beacon Natural Market, My Market, and Sunflower Natural Market, just to name a few.

MARKUS DRAXLER'S JOURNEY

Draxler had one mission after he graduated from his four-year hospitality apprenticeship in his native country of Austria: travel the world, learn what he could, then return home and take over the family

business. The son of a fifth-generation innkeeper, Draxler is no stranger to the hospitality industry. His parents encouraged him to experience the industry across the world to expand his knowledge and develop his skills. When Draxler arrived in New York City, Chef Daniel Boulud became his mentor, and Draxler fell in love with the upscale dining experience during his time as Maitre d’ Hotel at Restaurant Daniel.

He worked all around the world, from South Africa to Europe, from ski resorts to cruise ships. He even met his wife, from New Jersey, while working on a ship. Draxler came to America in 1999 and decided to stay, after seeing the potential to grow his career and his family.

Draxler founded SOLEX Fine Foods (a combination of his daughters’ names, Sophia and Alexia) in 2011. In 2013, SOLEX purchased Catsmo. When the two companies first merged, Catsmo had no out-of-state clientele and no retail market. Draxler explains merging SOLEX and Catsmo was a challenge; however, he had a mission to provide the best and freshest products to chefs and consumers. He continually refers to his “vision” for the company, with his sights set on growth to other states, a larger retail presence, and product development.

Today, SOLEX is a growing force with a sales office in Manhattan, warehouse in Northern New Jersey, and the smokehouse facility in Wallkill. The company has found great success amid a recent expansion and growth into the retail market. Draxler paid homage to his mentor, Chef Boulud, with a Catsmo-exclusive line of smoked salmon called *Épicerie Boulud*. Draxler continues to carry the lessons of attentiveness, time management, and leadership from his early experiences into his own business.

Draxler stands behind the quality of his products, which are a major part of his professional and personal life. “Every weekend at home, we make a big breakfast both days: everything bagels, cream

cheese, Catsmo's Gold Label smoked salmon, two soft boiled eggs, and avocado," he says. "If I don't have salmon on the weekends, I'm getting in trouble," he jokes. The family also enjoys caviar on Christmas and holidays, though his girls request it weekly. "My wife has a better palette than I do, so I know if she's not happy, we have to look into a recipe," he says with a laugh. "We have a great product and I think everybody should try it."

SOURCING & SUSTAINABILITY

Catsmo smokes Atlantic salmon, most of which is farm-raised. Draxler emphasizes the importance of ensuring the product is fresh, which is much more attainable with farm-raised fish. Wild-caught salmon fishing season is only during the summer months, so it would need to be frozen to be sold year-round. Sourcing farm-raised salmon allows for consistently fresh catch, with quality at the forefront. "The logistics of getting farm-raised salmon became much more efficient, because it became easier on the traceability process." With increased technology, salmon farms must have transparent and sustainable operations. Catsmo's Atlantic salmon are sourced from certified aquaculture centers who are committed to sustainability and offering responsibly-raised salmon to buyers without polluting oceans with antibiotics or stripping the oceans clean of seafood.

Simon and Theate identified farms from around the world in Norway, Scotland, Chile, Faroe Islands, which are where Catsmo sources most of its salmon. "We make sure they're all sustainable farmers and also have a traceability chain where the product comes in fast and fresh." Draxler says. "We have a product that we buy fresh, smoke fresh, and sell fresh. The recipe we have and how we treat the fish gives you this nice silky texture, which some other

smokehouses don't have. And, the color you get is different from a fresh fish versus frozen."

Catsmo boasts quality and a commitment to food safety and sustainability. "Especially in the last 10 years, we've seen a big



Quality, freshness, and transparency are some of the most important factors when it comes to sourcing caviar.

trend in local, sustainable, transparent products," Draxler says. The company holds an SQF certification. Catsmo purchases fresh salmon that is certified by the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) or Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP).

SOLEX continues to source the highest-quality wild mushrooms, local dairy and produce, wild game, seafood, and truffles. Quality and freshness are some of the most important factors when it comes

to the company's products. Its caviar comes from all over the world. White Sturgeon caviar comes from California, while Ossetra caviar is sourced from Belgium and Israel. Each caviar shipment is carefully graded to ensure it meets standards and a criterion of bright glossy color, fresh smell, uniformly sized eggs, and lightly salty flavor.

Growing a company whose product relies on freshness and quick turnout requires time. Catsmo keeps records of sales from the last few years to help project growth and anticipate changes in years ahead. "I can't just say I need an extra 10,000 pounds of salmon. It takes time to fill the inventory and source the product often," says Draxler. "It takes planning and effort to figure out how to sustain our big accounts." The company is implementing updated manufacturing



Catsmo uses only sustainably-raised Atlantic salmon sourced from certified aquaculture centers located in the coldest parts of the Atlantic.



Catsmo creates curated gourmet gift collections for William-Sonoma and other top retail chains.

and traceability systems, which Draxler says is crucial to support the growth of the company.

OVERCOMING TRIALS

The onset and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic caused changes in production and supply chains. “During the last few years, COVID has definitely had an impact on us and hurt our

business. It was a bit of a wakeup call for me,” said Draxler. “Things are getting better, but our costs have increased dramatically. It started with labor costs, gas prices, importing fees, packaging material,” Draxler said. “We have to be very mindful of what’s happening around us, because there’s a lot that we cannot control.”

A survey by the National Restaurant Association revealed that 95% of restaurants in the United States had experienced considerable supply delays or shortages in recent months. “We’d like to have a crystal ball, because a lot of this is out of our hands. I think I would sleep a little bit better,” Draxler jokes. “But even with all of the hiccups we had, we survived. You need a good team behind you that really supports and looks out for you when things like this happen.”

THE TEAM DYNAMIC

With the need for more space to accommodate a growing client base and retail market, Catsmo invested in developing its manufacturing facility in Wallkill, adding a 7,000 square foot extension to the 25,000+ square foot existing facility. The facility is set on a 120-acre plot of land, Catsmo also upgraded its machinery, switching to an updated retail slicer, where the salmon gets weighed

Featuring state-of-the-art equipment and a large, multidisciplinary space, DCC’s new Mechatronics Lab will meet the diverse needs of our evolving industry and become the premier training and manufacturing hub of the Mid-Hudson Valley.

THE FUTURE IS HERE.

DCC @ FISHKILL MECHATRONICS LAB **OPENING SEPT. 2023**

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- 6,000-square-foot facility conveniently located at the intersection of Route 9 and I-84 in Fishkill
- Specialized modern equipment to facilitate learning and production in four disciplines: **Automation, Electrical, HVAC & Mechanical**
- Certificate, degree and credential programs aligned with industry needs

To learn more about the programs or how your business might participate, contact the Office of Workforce Development and Continuing Education at (845) 431-8900 or workforce@sunydutchess.edu.

DUTCHESS
COMMUNITY COLLEGE



From left to right: CFO, Frédéric Pothier; CEO, Markus Draxler; VP of Production, Sebastian Theate

automatically and sliced. Other new changes include adding vacuum pack machines, and a new testing lab separate from the production area. Though modern manufacturing equipment allows for some automation, Draxler implores the significance of customer service, operations, food safety, and financial teams in helping achieve his vision for the company.

“Finding and attracting the right talent is definitely a little bit of a challenge where we are,” Draxler says. “You don't get the same pool of people you have in New York City or northern New Jersey, and bigger metropolitan areas.” A Hudson Valley location, however, means job opportunities for locals, and access to the ever-growing manufacturing sector. Catsmo’s employees come from Kingston, Newburgh, Pine Bush, Poughkeepsie, and other areas in the Hudson Valley. There are anywhere from 45 to 60 employees on-site at Catsmo’s Ulster County facility, and 90 employees in total who work for SOLEX and Catsmo.

Catsmo has focused on hiring to expand its team of employees, which has been a struggle, Draxler explains. But education and skills are not necessarily the traits that stand out most to Catsmo’s leadership; attitude is. “I like to hire more based on the person’s personality and attitude,” Draxler says. “If someone is willing to work and has a good attitude, we can teach them skills” The company focuses on internal growth and encourages its employees to explore new opportunities. Drivers have become warehouse and floor managers. Packers have become production managers. “I think it’s important to show the team that if you work hard, have the right attitude, think positively, and have the vision that I do for the company, you can grow with the company,” Draxler says. “When our employees are happy and do well, the company does well.”

GLASS HALF-FULL

For Draxler, the sky is the limit when it comes to Catsmo’s future. He hopes to double the company within the next five years and open more distribution centers in other states. He has his sights set on expanding to Florida, with its booming hospitality industry. Draxler also envisions spending more time on research and development and potentially expanding product line offerings. “When you grow and develop your products, you have to make sure you don’t lose the quality,” he says. “It’s easy to make a sale but you have to execute it well.”

Despite challenges the company has faced, Catsmo has a bright future ahead under Draxler’s direction and collaboration with Simon and Theate. “When I first came to America, I heard this saying about the glass being half-full or half-empty. My glass is mostly half-full,” he says. Draxler is confident that the support of his team and the increasing demand from his client base will help Catsmo and SOLEX reach even greater success in the years to come. “You have to have a dream and a vision, because you always have to work for something.”

Taylor Dowd is the Communications and Marketing Coordinator at the Council of Industry.

