



LET *it* FLOW

A Virginia trout farm is reviving the state fish and wowing local chefs in the process

By Eileen Mellon

PAN-PAVEL/GETTY IMAGES



Smoke in Chimneys owner Ty Walker approaches the spring house that provides fresh water for the hatchery.

Three years ago, Ty Walker got a call that would change the course of his life forever. The voice on the other end was a real estate agent friend, telling him about an abandoned trout hatchery in New Castle.

Tucked away off a back road in bucolic Craig County, the hatchery was originally built in the 1930s. Owned and operated by the U.S. Department of the Interior, then by the commonwealth of Virginia, it changed hands a few times before sitting unused for years. On a whim, Walker went to visit the property.

"I came up here, and no water was on anywhere," he recalls, pointing to an expanse of grass that now features seven raceway tanks with glistening water

housing thousands of trout.

And while Walker, now 33, couldn't initially envision a bustling trout farm there, something about the property made him pause. Working multiple jobs, newly married and with a growing family, he had been searching for a lifestyle change, something to give him a deeper sense of purpose, something tangible to pull him out of bed and make him feel alive — perhaps he'd found it.

"I was sitting under that hazelnut tree right there and was like, 'Should I do this?'" Walker says. "I felt like I was so scattered and everything in my life wasn't related to anything else. I wanted to do one thing and see, if I put my energy into it, what can happen." >



[From left] Walker and Smoke in Chimneys team member Matthew Wagner

The result? The unexpected revival of the humble brook trout, Virginia's state fish, and a superior product that local chefs can't stop talking about. Now entering his second year of sales, Walker and his Smoke in Chimneys hatchery are changing the trout game and the perception of farm-raised fish.

THE LIGHTBULB MOMENT

Walker wasn't new to the agricultural lifestyle when he visited the hatchery that first day. A Franklin County native, he and his wife, Shannon, had farmed in Oregon before returning to Virginia, raising heritage-breed pigs and running a raw milk share together. He had also done plenty of fly-fishing throughout his life, but, as Walker says bluntly, "It's the difference [between] eating watermelon and trying to grow watermelons.

"All these ponds and all this stuff, they're not worth anything unless you have someone running a hatchery, unless you have someone here who knows what they're doing," he adds.

Shortly after buying the property, Walker tracked down a former hatchery employee and pleaded with him for help. "He finds this valve, turns it on, and water starts shooting out, and it was like this lightbulb went off — you could see the potential," Walker recalls.

The magic of Smoke in Chimneys lies in the cool mountain water that flows downhill from a nearby spring

house. From a wooden structure housing limestone rock, the pristine water travels to the hatchery and raceway channels, relying simply on gravity. A lush, natural oasis, the spring provides a continuous supply of clean water that contributes to the trout's pure, unmatched taste.

"The first year was just figuring out what was going on, how to run the water, how to control the water. The second year was working to process the fish. That was a major undertaking. ... I need to make money off of every fish," Walker says.

Carved out of the earth, the raceways are small ponds that house the fish and receive direct sunlight. At all times, anywhere from 500 to 2,500 gallons of water a minute pump through the channels and create a fresh stream. Most industrial hatcheries don't have to worry about the flow of water because they have pumps generating oxygen or pumping liquid oxygen into the ponds, but at Smoke in Chimneys, monitoring the H₂O is vital. "That's an element we have to work with and constantly think about," says Matthew Wagner, Walker's brother-in-law and right-hand man at the hatchery. "That's what generates the oxygen for the fish. If the water level drops really low, the fish could start to get stressed or, even worse, die."

In Virginia, there are five state trout hatcheries, along with a handful of private operations that supply fish for stocking ponds and creeks. At its independent hatchery, Smoke in Chimneys grows four varieties of trout: rainbow, brown, golden and brook; the latter are the only fish truly native to Virginia. Inside the hatchery building, there are 35,000 delicate roe eggs, along with troughs of hatchlings that are monitored for up to 10 weeks. Once they reach an appropriate size, the young fish, or >

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—Ty Walker,
Smoke in Chimneys hatchery

EILEEN MELLON

Hatchlings remain in the troughs for about 10 weeks before being transferred to the raceways.



Water from the spring pumps into the raceways, home to thousands of trout.

RUE LUNA PHOTO



(Above) Wagner works in one of the larger raceways on the property.
(Right) Rainbow trout from Smoke in Chimneys.

fry, are carefully transferred to the raceways, where they'll remain for anywhere between 10 months and two years. Along with naturally occurring bugs, the fish eat a protein-heavy feed with minimal grain. Routinely monitored and tended, once they reach around a pound in size, they are harvested for restaurants and markets.

FRESHWATER FANBASE

Last year marked Smoke in Chimneys' first official foray into sales, and Walker and Wagner cleaned and processed over 8,000 trout. This year, they predict that number will double. Smoke in Chimneys started hustling trout to restaurants the old-school way — loading up the pickup and cooler, going to the back door of the kitchen, and saying, "Check this out."

Today, their fish have earned the approval of chefs at Richmond's Alewife and Southbound, Roanoke's The River and The Rail, and Staunton's Zynodoa, as well as farmer co-op FoodLore Provisions in Warm Springs. Each week they provide anywhere from 250 to 350 trout to



restaurants around the region.

"Seeing a family that is that excited about something that they're growing and establishing is infectious to me," says chef Joe Sparatta, co-owner of Southbound and Heritage. "Tyler is a unique personality, and he's probably raising some of the most delicious fish I've ever had."

Smoke in Chimneys fish are also sold at farmers markets in Blacksburg and Roanoke, where the hatchery is the only on-site purveyor of fresh fish. But Walker says

FROM TOP: ELLEN MELLON, RUE LUNA PHOTO

the scarcity of farm-raised trout is not unusual — most consumers are only familiar with commodity trout that comes from North Carolina or Michigan. “Trout is the state fish, and, like, nobody knows that,” Walker says. “It’s crazy, there’s 2,800 miles of trout spring in Virginia, but you can’t find trout.”

But now, chefs and their patrons can. A top-tier trout, the fish from Smoke in Chimneys have never been treated with chemicals or antibiotics, and they’re incredibly meaty, reminiscent of salmon. Eager chefs are drawn to the simplicity of an excellent product they don’t need — or want — to do much to for its true flavors to shine. While farm-raised fish have a reputation for poor quality and taste, locally, sustainably raised freshwater trout is slowly but surely changing perceptions.

“There’s definitely been pretty hardcore movements [toward sustainable practices] in beef and chicken and all those other aspects of farming, but fish, especially trout, it’s a totally new kind of thing,” Wagner says. “The education part has been a learning process for us, which is cool. We’re kind of in the beginning stages, I think, of sustainable kinds of inland seafood.”

STEWARDS OF THE SPRING

While family and fish are the foundation of Smoke in Chimneys, so is faith; the word is woven into the mission of the business.

“You really can’t do this without faith on some level,” Wagner says. He originally joined the hatchery as part of the farm’s Spirit and Soil internship, a 12-week program

that Walker is working to publish. Both farmers view the land as nature’s abundant prayer room.

“Spirituality and farming have been a part of all of our ancestors’ lives in whatever facet, and when you submit your whole livelihood to the seasons and the water levels and stuff outside of your control, you’re pretty quickly, pretty humbled,” Walker says.

While struggling with depression and suicide in college, Walker reawakened his faith many years ago and says now it assists him in maintaining what they do and conceiving a vision for the future. “I hated myself, I hated life,” he says, “and one day I was like, ‘God, if you’re real and you’re out there, help me.’ It wasn’t overnight, and no chariots of fire or bolt of lightning, but it was like, dude, all that stuff lifted off. I don’t know what, but something happened. Even in terms of coming here, it was a real step of faith.”

The name Smoke in Chimneys — “to figuratively put the smoke back into the chimneys,” Walker explains, “or in other words, bring life back to the land physically and spiritually” — not only represents the new ethos taking hold at the farm, but also Walker’s new path. “I’m investing in my own life and my kids,” he says. “I’m probably not going to make a million dollars, but it’s something where I’m around, and that I can be proud of and can involve my whole family.”



Smoke in Chimneys trout with pesto rice, Parmesan and greens from Odyssey.

Proudly Served Here

Richmond chefs and fishmongers sing the praises of Smoke in Chimneys trout

DONNIE GLASS, GRISETTE AND JARDIN

Donnie Glass compares the pink flesh and meatiness of Smoke in Chimneys’ trout to that of salmon. “We were blown away, from an eating standpoint. It’s just so much fatter, really rich and just better, just higher-quality meat, and a lot of that comes from the environment it is raised in,” he says. “We have such a commitment to local food, but it’s not worth the commitment if the quality isn’t there. It’s really nice when something this high-quality comes from our backyard.”

DREW LUCAS, TUCKAHOE SEAFOOD

At Tuckahoe Seafood, owner and fishmonger Drew Lucas has been a Smoke in Chimneys devotee since first connecting with Walker last year. In the store, they sell the trout whole, while featuring it in snacks from smoked trout deviled eggs to trout sushi. “[Walker’s] method of raising fish is so awesome to see, and doing things the right way,” Lucas says. “Being able to get a local fish like the spring-fed trout is super rad, ... and we stand behind it so much.”

BOBO CATOE JR., ALEWIFE AND ODYSSEY

One of Smoke in Chimneys’ longtime and most ardent supporters, chef and restaurateur Bobo Catoe Jr. sources trout from the hatchery for both Alewife and the newly opened Odyssey. “It’s super clean, it doesn’t taste muddy at all, like some freshwater fish does. It has a high fat content for being a farm-raised fish, and that’s a combination of what [Walker] feeds them and that fresh water — the fish has a cleaner lifestyle than a farmed fish. And, it doesn’t have to get shipped.”

Find Smoke in Chimneys trout in Richmond at Alewife, Belmont Butchery, Grisetto, Heritage, Odyssey, Southbound and Tuckahoe Seafood.