

# New hype for herring

OLD-WORLD RECIPES MEET NEW-WORLD MARKETING AT MA BAENSCH'S

BY JAMES E. HELD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY LUTERMAN



The scene could be straight out of a *Laverne and Shirley* episode: Cases of jars roll along conveyer belts and down into cellar coolers as busy employees carefully perform their designated tasks in the assembly line. While the city – Milwaukee – is the same, the year is 2010, and the setting is the real-life Ma Baensch factory, which buzzes with activity as employees package herring by hand as the company has done since 1932.

Wisconsin might seem an unlikely place for an oceanic fish-packing factory, but in the 19th and 20th centuries, European immigrants transplanted their passion for herring to the Dairy State. The small, plump fish not only mitigated the rigors of Lenten fasting but also formed an integral part of holiday feasts for immigrants. Many still consider it good luck to eat herring on New Year's Eve. Still, the Great Depression was hardly an opportune time for German immigrant Lena Baensch (who had her own secret herring recipe) to start a business. But when her husband, Otto, became unemployed, "Ma" peddled her fish to Milwaukee grocers, whose German, Polish and Scandinavian customers found it to be outstanding. Baensch Food Products Co. was born, and the rest is culinary history.

In 1945 the family moved to the company's current location in a red brick building on Locust Street. In 1999 the piscine torch was passed to current president Kim Wall, just as the salty fish began to lose favor among younger generations. "Herring's heyday was the 1940s and '50s," Wall explains.

While Ma Baensch's portrait still hangs in the office as an homage to the company's roots, this Beloit native and certified public accountant has given new life to a venerable product. Hoping to attract a wider consumer base, Wall tries to play up the fish's sexy side. When the art for the container was redesigned, Wall's lip print was used next to the tagline: "kiss of health." Herring is packed with heart-healthy Omega-3 fatty acids and proteins, and Ma's own son Reinhard Baensch lived to be 90.

Since 1999, Ma Baensch president Kim Wall (left) has worked to update the company's image – that includes a logo overhaul that is sealed with her own lip print.

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On assuming ownership, Wall obtained kosher certification for the herring, making it accessible to other appreciative customers. She also revamped the outdated packaging and prodded supermarket chains to display Ma Baensch products in meat and seafood departments rather than dairy cases. Still, these marketing innovations would mean little if the herring wasn't superlative.

Wall was savvy enough not to tamper much with Ma's recipes, which begin with Nova Scotia fishing families who land the herring from pristine waters before cleaning and packing the catch in brine. "Only the best are destined for pickling," she says. When the 220-pound barrels arrive, the fillets are drained, rinsed and immersed in marinade for 24 hours. "I use only liquid beet sugar and essential oils of herbs and spices," says Wall, who formerly owned a spice business. "If you find bay leaves and peppercorns in your herring, it's not Ma Baensch." The fillets are then packed in wine or cream sauce and distributed.

As the holiday season approaches, even Wall leaves her office to join the 16 other white-clad workers on the bustling factory floor in preparing the herring for shipment. One worker measures butter-

milk and chives for the cream sauce and pours them into the huge Hobart mixer, ensuring the right consistency, then gently adds herring fillets to the mixture. Another employee hand-packs and weighs the jars racing through other contraptions that wash and seal them with golden lids. Wall, with her long, brown locks tucked into a hairnet, handles the labeling machine. Amid the noise, her perceptive ear tunes in to the harsh timbre of clanging jars down the line. "I don't like the sound of that," she says, revealing her continual dedication to optimal quality.

"Ma Baensch is exclusively a Wisconsin product whose quality is never compromised," Wall states proudly. Lena founded her business amid the hardship and adversity of the Great Depression. Today, the smile she beams from her portrait on a wall in the company's factory seems to be for the woman of equal character who is now charged with maintaining Lena's legacy. Because in Wisconsin, Ma Baensch is not just herring—it's a culinary institution. **wf**

*Freelance writer James Held has had a jar of Ma Baensch herring in his fridge since he was a kid.*

While Ma Baensch no longer peers out from the label of her jars of herring, her portrait oversees production at the packing plant that still bears her name.