



Rick Queen shows some of Sunburst Trout Company's rainbows.

High-class TROUT

Haywood County waters and weather are just right for these rainbows

Text and photos by Kent Priestley

To get to the source of this remarkable flavor, you'll need to drive up a winding Haywood County cove, along cow-studded pastures, past gravelly river bends, into the mountains where in spring redbud and dogwood blooms hang on steep ridges. When you reach the place where the clear tailwaters of Lake Logan plunge from the Shining Rock Wilderness watershed, you've arrived.

This, you may be forgiven for thinking aloud, is a fine place to raise a fish.

The owners of Sunburst Trout Company have long known that theirs is a charmed location, and the world is waking to the quality and purity of their farm-raised trout. What began as a small pond-stocking farm five decades ago has burgeoned into a far-flung retail and wholesale business serving more than 200 buyers—restaurants, supermarkets and seafood brokers—as well as customers in practically every state via the company's Web site. In fact, one of New York City's premier chefs says this place produces the best trout eggs anywhere.

It was during his boyhood that company founder Dick Jennings succumbed to the 'call of the trout.' The Pennsylvania native had grown up visiting his grandparents' land near Cashiers in Jackson County, walking the woods and fishing the swift waters that ran through their property. The experience led Jennings in 1948 to establish a commercial trout farm there, and to set about learning how to raise the fish better and more efficiently. In 1965, he moved the business from Cashiers to its present Haywood County location near Canton, where its electric service is provided by Haywood EMC. Jennings' daughter, Sally Eason, and her husband, Steve, joined the operation in 1980.

"Dad had no idea how it would turn out," says Sally Eason during a tour of the company's grounds. "It was a work in process, you might say."

Cool, pure water is the most critical element in raising healthy trout, and Sunburst has it in abundance. Each minute, 12,000 gallons of fresh water gush into the concrete raceways where the trout are raised, flushing wastes to a settling pond for eventual composting, and recharging the water with oxygen. The water brings with it an acid tang, courtesy of the leaves shed each fall by the hardwood trees that cloak the watershed. The same quality is passed along to the trout, giving Sunburst's product a longer shelf life.

Sally Eason strides expertly down the narrow catwalk that stretches across the farm's largest set of raceways. Below, in the clear water, hundreds of trout form a speckled, living mosaic then startle and skitter away, breaking the water's surface with their movement.

10,000 pounds of rainbows per week

The company raises exclusively rainbow trout, and processes nearly 10,000 pounds of fish each week through every season. Treated to a high-protein, high

fat diet, the fish take about four years to reach their average harvest weight of three pounds. The feed includes a natural carotene that imparts a pink tinge to their flesh, a selling point for customers more familiar with store-bought salmon.

Once netted, the trout—never more than 600 at a time—rest in an ice slurry that quick-chills them and reduces trauma during the dressing process. “They basically go to sleep,” says Eason. “We’ve found over the years that it’s a much more humane and organically acceptable way to handle the fish.” The fish are cleaned and then passed through a motorized, Swiss-built filleting machine. Fillets are then hand-trimmed, and, according to customer wishes, the tiny pin bones may be removed using a specially designed tool. It is delicate, painstaking work.

“We have some five-star chefs as customers who want a fillet that’s trimmed perfectly, every fin cut off, the pin bones removed, and they don’t care what they’re going to pay for it,” explains Eason. The process, from harvest to cooler, clocks in at less than one hour.

Smoked trout is one of the company’s most in-demand products. In one corner of the processing room, Wes, one of Eason’s two sons, tends the hot smoker. The firebox burns a blend of hickory wood and grapevines, and the fillets are slow-smoked at 145 degrees. They emerge the color of mahogany and laced with a complex, delicate flavor, courtesy of the wood smoke and a blend of spices.

Sunburst also “cold smokes” trout. Select cuts of trout are coated with Kosher salt and dill and bathed for hours in red oak and charcoal smoke, chilled to 56 degrees by being passed through an ice chamber. The resulting product, finely shaved, is akin to lox.

The caviar

About 16 years ago, Eason’s father finally grew tired of seeing his trout’s golden eggs go to waste. Then as now, demand was increasing in the U.S. for alternative sources of caviar, as stocks of European sturgeon dwindled. Sunburst, it turns out, had long been discarding its most valuable product.

“We began to experiment with, gosh, I can’t even tell you how many recipes for caviar. So much trial and error,” says Eason. “Today, caviar is probably our flagship product.”

Caviarteria, a major wholesaler in New York, offered to buy whatever Sunburst produced. Then four years ago, an out-of-the-blue phone call from New York chef Rick Moonen, a standard-bearer for ecologically sustainable caviar, brought the company a torrent of new business.

“Rick said he’d been getting our product from Caviarteria, and wondered if he could buy it from us direct,” Eason says. “I said ‘sure.’ It turns out that he actually had lots of clout in New York. He did interviews and TV shows and articles about our product. He’s got a lot of friends, and soon his friends are calling, and the Culinary Institute of New York is calling. That was a very serendipitous phone call.”

Accolades followed Moonen’s attentions. A glowing write-up of Sunburst’s trout caviar found its way to the pages of *Gourmet* magazine in December 2001, just weeks after the company brought its new Web site online.

“It was just insane, what that article did for our Web sales,” Eason says.

On a fin and a prayer

It hasn’t been all success and champagne toasts at Sunburst, however. In 1986, a prolonged drought almost forced the company to close its doors forever.



Sally Eason, daughter of Sunburst Trout founder Dick Jennings, with employee Kyle Vaughn. “We’re a family,” Sally says of the Haywood County operation. “It’s about more than the fish.”

“We lost all of our fish, and thought we were going to shut down for good,” Eason says. “It just seemed like too much of a loss to suffer. But after a few months of being closed, my dad and my husband thought, ‘you know, we could maybe do something with this. We should rebuild.’”

Rebuilding meant replacing several outmoded trout ponds with a new set of concrete raceways, and adding a liquid oxygen tank to the company’s standard equipment, which cools the water supply during summer’s hottest, driest spells.

“Rain is a huge factor, maybe the biggest factor in trout farming,” says Eason. “For us, a shower every day would be ideal. It used to do that, maybe 50 years ago, but in the cycle we’re in now, we don’t see it.” She smiles. “We’re probably the only people in western North Carolina who would be thrilled to see it rain every day.”

Last summer, there was far too much of a good thing. The farm, like so much of western North Carolina, was buffeted by back-to-back hurricanes. The flooding that ensued destroyed the pipe that brings water from Lake Logan and scattered their precious trout to the winds. Miraculously, says Eason, “we only missed one day of processing, which is pretty amazing.”

Sunburst employs a tight knit crew of between 12 and 18, depending on the season. Turnover is low.

“Above all, our philosophy is that we’re a family,” says Eason. “Families tend to pull together and work better than strangers. That, really, is the key to our success. It’s about more than the fish.”

Kent Priestley of Asheville is a regular contributor to Carolina Country.

How to get Sunburst trout

Fresh trout from Sunburst is served at Asheville’s landmark Grove Park Inn and at the Inn at Biltmore Estate. Selected products are available regionally at the following stores: Ingles, Harris Teeter, the Fresh Market, Earthfare, the French Broad Co-op, Bi-Lo, Wellspring Grocery, and Whole Foods.

Products may also be ordered direct for home delivery at the company’s website, www.sunbursttrout.com. Sunburst Trout Company may be reached toll-free by calling (800) 673-3051.