

# Indigenous-owned BC Salmon Cannery Revitalizing Economies of Nuu-chah-nulth Communities

St. Jean's Cannery and Smokehouse in Nanaimo, BC is the largest tuna and salmon cannery in Canada. The Indigenous-owned cannery is also a gourmet food retailer that is known for many specialty products, including smoked Pacific oysters and seafood under the authentic Indigenous brand, *Gratitude Seafood*.

*"We bought St. Jean's because of its expertise and reputation," said Larry Johnson, Nuu-chah-nulth Seafood Limited Partnership President. "It was also a good investment because it lined up with our traditional practises and principles."*

Nuu-chah-nulth Seafood was formed in 2003 to help communities get more involved in shellfish aquaculture and commercial fishing and regain control of the marine resources that had sustained them for tens of thousands of years. The Nuu-chah-nulth principles Johnson mentioned are: Hish-uk ts'a-walk (everything is one), lisaak (a greater respect with caring) and Uu-a-thluk (to take care of using a modern approach). These principles bind the communities together as First Nations and are woven into any business model says Johnson.

Family-run for more than 50 years, St. Jean's was purchased in 2015. The sacred principles of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations are one reason the previous owner Gerard St. Jean sold the cannery to Nuu-chah-nulth Seafood. "Corporations come and go. We're here for the long haul," said Johnson.

Funding from the federal Pacific Commercial Fisheries Diversification Initiative was "very instrumental" in the purchase said Johnson. The time-limited Strategic Partnership Initiative program was established to enhance the participation and economic benefit of Indigenous communities in commercial fisheries activities on the west coast. It also leveraged the success of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative.

Canneries once flourished along the BC coast with as many as 80 in operation in 1918. While St. Jean's is now the last cannery in Canada, it continues to thrive under Nuu-chah-nulth ownership. Up to 130 workers are employed at the cannery, which produces as many as 30,000 cans a day during peak production periods. Canned products are sold under the St. Jean's and Raincoast Trading retail brands.

The new *Gratitude Seafood* brand is a specific to Nuu-chah-nulth Seafood LP. The company used the knowledge learned from the St. Jean's experience to develop the authentic Indigenous brand, which was launched in 2019. St. Jean's is also used as the co-packer of *Gratitude Seafood* products.

St. Jean's handles processing for a number of commercial clients, including First Nations in the interior of the Province, as well as thousands of recreational fish harvesters who want their catch custom canned or smoked.





The transition of the cannery to Nuuchahnulth Seafood was eased by Gerard St. Jean and the cannery's employees. There is mutual respect and sharing of values says Johnson. "It's been a mutually beneficial relationship that continues to this day."

*"We're a corporation with a professional board of directors who have expertise in finance, commercial fisheries, law and First Nations governance," says Jennifer Woodland the CEO of Nuuchahnulth Seafood. "Where we don't have expertise, we find partners that do and learn from them."*

Strategic planning is a key ingredient in their success she says. A five-year plan sets the future direction as a result of brainstorming for opportunities and then doing the research to determine their viability. A detailed one-year plan then lays out the tasks for the year ahead. "We take our time and stay true to our mission," says Woodland.

Taking time can mean building capacity by helping communities purchase boats, quotas and licences, and helping with business and financial planning.

The Business Development Team in the Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative played an important role in this work. "They've been really great to deal with," she says. "We took our time. We've been open and honest and have built a strong mutual relationship with them."

Both Woodland and Johnson say they separate business from politics.

Helping the Nuuchahnulth gain experience in processing sales and marketing through the purchase of St. Jean's fit perfectly with the overarching goal of reconnecting community members to their marine roots and revitalizing community economic opportunities through new, sustainable activities related to seafood harvesting. "It's helping to bring life back into our communities," says Johnson.

**Best Practises:**  
*Business Diversification  
and Shared Values*

