

Pure Food & Fish

The Market's only 'walk-in' fish market turns 49!

By MEGAN LEE

This summer, Sol "Solly" Amon celebrates 49 years at the helm of Pure Food & Fish, the Market's only walk-in specialty fish stall. This landmark makes him one of the Market's longest continuous merchants, but he began working in the Market years before that.

Born in July 1929, Amon grew up in the Market. He was first photographed here around the tender age of four. A *Seattle Times* photographer snapped a photo of him proudly standing in a seemingly-giant orange crate.

His dad, Jack Amon, began working in the many fish markets of Pike Place in 1910. Through the years he was a partner at American Fish, Philadelphia Fish, Pike Place Fish Co. and at Pure Food & Fish. Walking up the main staircase at Lowell's, about half-way up, you can see a picture of Jack Amon in front of Palace Fish, on the waterfront. Jack Amon, with the moustache, is pictured to the left of Louis Israel, brother-in-law of owner Nissim Alhadeff. Amon says the picture must have been taken right, in the 1930s, about the time Palace Fish opened.

In 1956, Sol Amon opened Pure Food & Fish and has been here, in the same space, in the main Market Arcade ever since.

It wasn't just Jack and his father selling fish down at the Market. He says at one time or another his brother, his mother, and even his sister, have done time at Pure Food & Fish. Amon loves coming to work in the Market. He appreciates the community and the unexpected, unique nature of the place. He says this is where people go if they want something a little different or a little better, and he is ready to supply them.

Over the years he has seen a lot of changes, but he maintains that many things stay the same. Back when he first opened, and when he was working for his father, they went down to the Elliot Bay waterfront to buy fish from the slew of wholesalers hawking the day's catch on the piers, hand selecting each fish. In the 1940s the wholesalers began to move and by the mid-1950s most wholesalers had relocated. In the 1950s, there were three fish markets on the waterfront and seven in the Market.

Now, he is one of four Pike Place Market fish markets and he buys all his fish from distributors in South Seattle and around Sea-Tac. Amon still chooses each fish he sells, but now it is delivered. The increasing supply enabled Amon to diversify. The jet engine changed every thing, now he can offer fresh fish from all corners of the globe. He still specializes in Pacific Northwest salmon (fresh and smoked), lobsters and all one can find in "Crustacean Alley".

Amon adds, generally, everything stays the same [in the Market] as far as shopping, just the players change. There are always personalities, issues, dilemmas, cycles, etc.

There is no end to Amon's many Market

stories. He began before the Depression and experienced the bustling 1940s. He remembers a horse meat market. He was here for the post-war economic boom of the 1940s and the 1950s suburban sprawl and urban decline, when much of the Market was boarded-up, forgotten, decomposing and almost abandoned. He stayed.

He watched the decline that led to the proposed demolition and "Pike Place Plaza Project" and then watched the citizens of Seattle vote to save the Market, in 1971. From his perch (when up in his office he watches everything from a small lookout-window) he saw the Market rejuvenated, re-tiled and returned to the prosperous shoppers' Mecca it is, again.

"I think it was the hippies – ahem, for lack of better term – that kept the Market going," said Amon. "They wanted something special, a different shopping experience and to get back to nature. It is more interesting to shop here. People come here looking for something special. If you look hard enough you can find anything down here."

One of the biggest changes, Amon recalls with a chuckle, is the addition of ice machines. Before, each fish market picked up two or three 400-pound boxes of chipped ice daily, depending on the weather. Now, the ice is produced on-site. It magically falls from the ceiling inside the walk-in freezer.

Over the years Amon has maintained his pure and basic fish philosophy:

"We go with the flow. If business changes we change with it. It's not what we want, it is what the customers want. You sell what they want and give them their money's worth and they'll come back," he says, with a Lou Piniella brand matter-of-fact-ness. "It's all about selling a good product."

With his pragmatic attitude and keenness for the fish business, Amon has cultivated a variety of devout customers over the years: restaurants, people who visit him for seafood to send home whenever they are in town, Amon smiles and greets them by name. NBC News guy Tom Brokaw jogs by when he is in town. Jeff Smith, the now-deceased Frugal Gourmet, was a regular customer.

The Market, a microcosm of the nation, is a melting pot and a natural home to immigrants and new businesses. The Market has always been home to a diverse population including Italians, Native Americans, Japanese, Jews, Filipinos, Hmongs, etc. The Amon family is part of the large Sephardic Jew population that settled in Seattle. In 1906 there were 17 Sephardic Jews living in Seattle, by 1907 the population doubled and by 1930 Seattle was second only to New York City, in Sephardic population.

"I remember my dad telling me about his dad," said Marta Paleez, owner of the Copacabana, which she and her father opened in 1964, after the family was politically exiled from Bolivia.

"He told what a good man and good businessman he was, and the other 'sephardistas.' There were so many languages spoken in the Market, it was a sort of language exchange around – people would sit and teach each other."

The "fish boys" down at Pure Food & Fish are as eclectic as the Market itself.

The charming and recognizable Harry Caldo, with his trademark mustache, has been working there since 1970. He returned from Vietnam that year and planned on working at Pure Food & Fish, with his brother, just part-time through the summer. He is still there every morning about 3:30 a.m., and loves it. There was a rumor going around that Dave Attell from Comedy Central's *Insomniac* program was interested in featuring

Caldo on his show.

Caldo remembers the pre-ice machine days. He and Amon would go down to the waterfront in their rickety old pick-up truck, with a heavy metal hand-truck and wooden boxes, and load up the ice. He also remembers when the cold storage broker went on strike; he and Amon had to carry each fish out of storage and load it into their trusty truck.

Amon doesn't foresee things at Pure Food changing anytime soon; he is happy. He still enjoys coming in nearly every day, being in charge, doing the shipping and ordering the fish.

"Any family taking over is quite a way down the line, the next grandchild is just 13," he says, smiling, with a wink. "But, we'll see."



Pure Food and Fish founder Sol "Solly" Amon, fishmonger extraordinaire. Photo/Bradley Enghaus



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