



Ode to the Sardine

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Grilled sardines on the menu in Douarnenez, France

May I just say that there are worse ways to pick a vacation destination as a museum curator? After a wildly successful SardineFest and the opening of the *Sardineland* exhibit this summer, when it came time to enjoy some much-needed R&R, I decided to head to Douarnenez, France. This sardine fishing port in Brittany, France celebrates its fishing heritage. And of course, I had to try their canned, grilled, and pâté sardines.



Map showing the global markets of Douarnenez canned sardines. Image courtesy of the Douarnenez Port Muséé.



*Sardine carrier JACOB PIKE at a Dix Island weir,
Kosti Ruohomaa Collection, LB2017.19.25896*

Whereas, in Maine, fishermen initially caught herring migrating near shore in stationary weirs or with stop seines that closed off the mouths of coves. Sailing sardine carriers were loaded with the catch at the weirs and stop seines for transport back to the canneries. With the advent of motors in the post-World War II era, purse seiners and trawlers preyed on the off-shore schools of herring, and motorized sardine carriers brought the catch to market.



Conserverie Chancerelle in Douarnenez

Douarnenez's canneries sat high upon the hill, rising up from the fishing port of Rosmeur. One such cannery was the Conserverie Chancerelle, which opened in 1830. A century later, as other canneries were closing, Chancerelle modernized its production line and diversified the types of fish it canned. Operations moved to the outskirts of town, although the historic building remains as a retail operation. In comparison, Maine's sardine canneries were built on wharves or right along the shoreline, providing easy access to the sardine carriers that docked alongside to unload the catch.



*Frenchman's Bay Packing Company on the shore of Bunker's Cove in South Gouldsboro
Eastern Collection, LB2007.1.102510.*



*The Makfroid 2 factory (seen in the background) processes Mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*), Horsemackerel (*Trachurus trachurus*), Sardines (*Sardina pilchardus*), and Sprat (*Sprattus sprattus*).*

Today, frozen fish factories sit on filled land in Douarnenez' fishing port of Rosmeur, and a quay protects the motor fishing boats moored in the harbor.



Stinson Seafood cannery in Prospect Harbor, Stinson Seafood Collection.

This photo from the Stinson Seafood Collection shows the Stinson Seafood cannery in Prospect Harbor just before it closed in 2010. It was the last cannery operating in Maine, which unlike Brittany, did not diversify the types of seafood products it processed within one facility. Since the sardine cannery closed, the building has been used to process lobster, sat idle in an unsuccessful bid to process aquaculture salmon, served as a blueberry frozen storage unit, and recently changed hands to become a lobster and crab processing facility.

For all the differences, I find that the settings of the canneries on the rocky coastlines on both sides of the Atlantic are mirrored in the hardworking folks extracting natural resources from an area that oozes natural beauty. It is a tale of fishermen and cannery workers affected by fishing shortages, booms during war time, and changing economics outside their control. And it all rests on the back of a small fish that fits into a can.