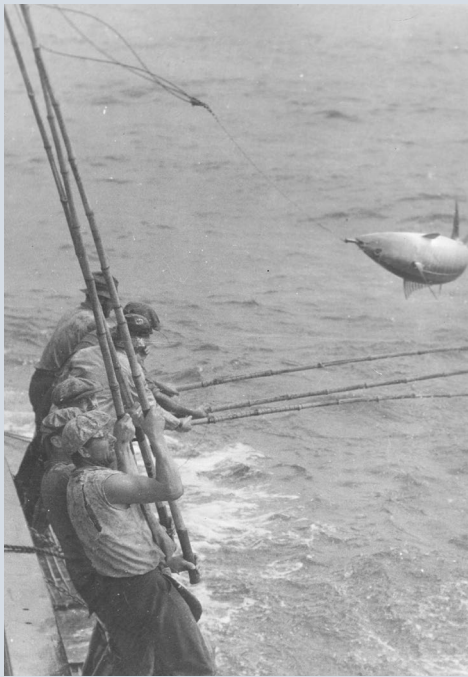


San Diego's Tuna Canneries

We ate lunch, but we didn't have a break for dinner. We worked straight through. It was pretty hard . . . sometimes there was only two or three hours of work, it just depended on how much fish the cannery had, how many boats came in . . . We were only paid 33 cents an hour.

--Katie Asaro, tuna fish packer, 1927.

Thousands of men and women worked on the fishing boats and in the tuna canneries. For many years, "the Tuna Capital of the World" was San Diego. It was an industry that brought jobs and wealth to the region as millions of cans of tuna shipped globally, stamped with the words "Packed in San Diego."



San Diegans had been fishing for tuna since the 1880s when Portuguese fishermen based at La Playa caught albacore from small boats with hook and line. Fish that was not consumed locally was pickled and shipped in barrels, usually to San Francisco.

A San Pedro sardine canner had a better idea. In 1903, Alfred Halfhill began experimenting with canning a variety of other fish, including long fin tuna, or albacore. Steamed cooked, Halfhill found the albacore turned white and tasted something like cold chicken, leading to the legendary description: "Chicken of the Sea."

Halfhill aggressively marketed his "white meat tuna." Within a few years, sales of canned albacore took off. Packed in olive oil in individually soldered cans, the tuna was shipped across the country and enjoyed wide success, particularly in the Italian immigrant community in New York City.

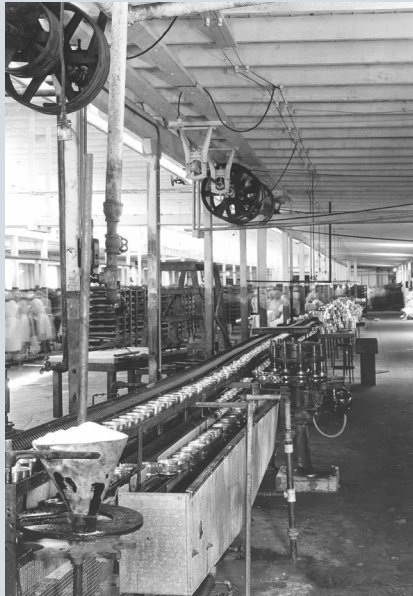
San Diegans also experimented with canning tuna. A local fisherman named Bob Israel packed albacore with olive oil, Japanese chili peppers, and Bay leaves, and successfully sold quarter pound tins for ten cents each.

San Diego's first large tuna cannery--the Pacific Tuna Canning Company--started up in 1911 at the foot of F Street. The plant would burn down the next year but in 1913 it reopened at the foot of 26th Street. The Premier Packing Company opened in 1912 at the foot of Crosby Street. Nine more tuna canneries started on the San Diego waterfront in the next decade.

The first San Diego plants were small, employing fewer than 100 people each. A wave of consolidations dropped the number of canneries to only five by 1920 but the overall number of employees grew. San Diego Packing started in 1914 with 50 workers but after absorbing other companies it employed 400 by 1935. Van Camp Sea Food swallowed three smaller companies and employed nearly 800 by 1932.

In the early century canneries were scattered along the waterfront from the foot of Laurel Street to Barrio Logan. By the 1930s, San Diego's "cannery row" would lie roughly between 16th and 28th Streets alongside fuel docks, shipbuilders, and anchored tuna clippers.

From each cannery a wharf jutted out into the bay where the fishing boats would unload the tuna. The process at the giant Van Camp cannery was typical. Here large cranes hoisted baskets of tuna from the boats and emptied them into a flume where the fish flowed a hundred yards into the cannery. After inspection, the tuna moved on conveyors belts to a room where men gutted and washed the fish and then loaded them into ovens for "pre-cooking."



After cooling, the tuna was sent to the sixty-foot cleaning tables where women removed bones and skin and separated out the white meat. In large wooden trays the tuna was then conveyed to the packing tables where more women placed the meat by hand into cans. Machinery then dropped measured quantities of salt and vegetable oil in the cans as they moved along a conveyor to the lidding machines. Once sealed, the cans were steam-cooked, cooled, and readied for shipment.

Katie Asaro cleaned fish and packed cans for the Westgate cannery. "When I started in to learn how to pack, we were paid by the hour. Then we were on piece work. The faster we packed, the more trays we packed, the more money we made." Westgate paid its fish cleaners 30 cents for each tray.

Oil and salt was added along the conveyor belt

It was repetitive, assembly line labor. But the jobs were sought after, particularly during the Depression years of the 1930s. The workers were always on call, ready to run to the canneries whenever the tuna boats arrived at the wharves. "Sometimes there would be two, three, or four boats at the same time," Asaro remembered. "The cannery would be flooded with fish and it had to be packed."

Packing the tuna "was all in our hands." "You'd pick up the fish with your right hand, put it in the can, and then put the can on the conveyor belt. Then it went right up to where the oil went in and it was sealed and then cooked some more and then labeled."

While San Diego canneries and fishing boats dominated tuna production for most of the 1900s, profits and prospects were always cyclical. As early as 1933, worrisome competition from Japan led the *San Diego Sun* to headline a news story: "Tuna—A Doomed Local Industry." But local expertise beat back the competitors in the 1930s and continued to do so for decades.

When foreign competition threatened in the 1950s, the fishermen ended the tradition of hook and line fishing and converted their boats to seiners that used large nylon nets to corral schools of tuna. The efficiency of the seiners restored prosperity but courted controversy. Netting schools of tuna killed dolphins and sharks caught in the nets. The fishermen worked hard to eliminate the collateral damage.

Predictions of a “sunset industry” returned in 1980s. Renewed foreign competition and rising costs forced cannery operations to go abroad. In June 1982, Bumble Bee Seafoods closed its plant at the foot of Crosby Street, where San Diego women had canned tuna for 70 years. The Van Kamp Sea Food cannery—San Diego’s last tuna cannery--followed two years later.



Cleaning tuna fish at the Cohn-Hopkins Company at the foot of Crosby Street in 1931.

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