

Cod Liver Oil and the Northern Avalon

*Oh Doctor, dear Doctor, Oh dear Doctor John,
Your cod liver oil is so pure and so strong,
I'm afraid of me life, I'd go down in the soil,
If me wife don't stop drinking your cod liver oil.*

Johnny Burke, songwriter



It may not be impressive to look at, but the lowly cod liver was a valuable commodity because of its oil. Cod liver oil was produced on the Northern Avalon for over four centuries. Its sale provided supplementary income to hard-pressed fishermen and their families.

Historically cod liver oil was used for many purposes: it provided fuel for lamps until it was supplanted by kerosene in the 1850s. It was used in leather tanning,

soap making and as a paint base. It even lubricated machinery. These uses faded away but starting in the late 18th century, doctors began to notice what ordinary fishing families had long believed: cod liver oil was "good for you." Doctors began to prescribe it for a number of maladies. It became a "medicinal tonic."

The Original Cod Liver Oil

The original method of producing cod liver oil was fermentation. This resulted in a dark coloured "common," "raw" or "rotted" oil with a penetrating smell. It was produced on many stages in Pouch Cove, Shoe Cove, Biscayan Cove and nearby Bauline. The cod livers were expertly harvested by the "cut throat" and tossed into a barrel where sun and weather broke the livers down into oil that floated to the top, and heavier bits of a meaty residue and water, that sank to the bottom. The oil was drained and used by fishing families and their neighbours as a general tonic or restorative, or sold to the merchants that bought the salted cod, produced on the same stages.

The Start of Cod Liver Factories

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a new method of producing a refined, lighter, and less pungent product gained ground in Europe. Pouch Cove was not far behind in producing for this market. Around 1850 a "Mr. Squary" briefly operated the first factory. Clement Hudson established the second factory in 1859, founding a Hudson enterprise that lasted for a century. Over subsequent years the region saw a proliferating number of cod liver oil factories. Other family names in the region associated with cod liver factories include Mundy, Baldwin, Pippy, Gruchy, Shea, Evans, King and LeGrow as well as the Cape St. Francis Co-Operative. The abundant fishing grounds of Cape St. Francis, coupled with its proximity to refining and bottling plants in St. John's made the area an important centre of cod liver oil production. Newfoundland cod liver oil was sold both domestically and exported.

How They Operated

Cod liver oil factories were ingeniously designed, built and maintained. As Harrv LeGrow, whose father and uncle ran a factory in Bauline points out: These complex operations were run "by people who had no engineering



degrees...They had common sense." Factories were generally two stories and located near streams for they relied on heating the livers by steam. Water was piped into basement boilers that delivered steam to huge vats filled with cut livers. The vats extended through the upper floor to the lower and had to be supported. The heat source was wood or coal and light was a lantern. A series of valves regulated water flow, steam, and heat, and drained the oil. Huge 45 gallon barrels of oil were then transported first by cart and later by truck for further refining in St. John's. Secondary oil was extracted from the residue by a cod liver press.

What Modern Medicine Says

We now know exactly why cod liver oil is "good for you": it contains Vitamin D for strong bones, Vitamin A for healthy eyesight; and Omega-3 fatty acids for a healthy heart!