

Chapter 8

What Food is Processed in Whatcom County?

Food growing and food manufacturing go hand in hand when one considers the structure of an agricultural economy and a food system. In counties such as Whatcom, far more food is produced locally than could ever be consumed locally; much of this is in dairy and berries, which are initially processed locally and then marketed nationally or globally. The local availability of agricultural land and processing facilities is integral to the long-term viability of agricultural regions; this will grow more critical as fuel costs rise.

Whatcom County has food processing facilities for 3 primary local ingredients (seafood, dairy, and berries) and for raw materials that come from other regions. In addition, Whatcom County has bakeries, cereal processors, wineries, a flour mill, and numerous meat processing companies. For a greater discussion of Whatcom County's history of food processing, see Chapter 5 of this Community Food Assessment.

Seafood and Fisheries

Bellingham Cold Storage (BCS) is the largest food processing facility in Whatcom County. Two locations with a combined 13.6 million cubic feet of storage capacity process one billion pounds of product per year. BCS manages the receiving, freezing, handling, and shipping of products and also houses 15 value-added food processing businesses. All businesses combined, BCS employs approximately 1,000 people year round and an additional 600-800 people during the peak harvesting season of July to October.ⁱ

Fish and seafood comprise over 55% of processing activity at BCS. Most fish is received from vessels harvesting within about 60-80 miles of Bellingham. Fruits and vegetables come from Whatcom County, Skagit County, and British Columbia. The facility also processes, stores, and ships dairy products and meat. Most products are shipped within North America, but some go to Europe and Asia as well. Not all products moving through BCS are local. For example, low-demand chicken legs are transported to BCS from across the country to be stored and then shipped to Russia. Several value-added processors housed at BCS process seafood (e.g., turning pollack into artificial crabmeat). Items leaving BCS run the gamut from retail-ready products to component food items that are further processed elsewhere. An example of the latter is a type of sauce cube that is shipped to the Midwest and California to be incorporated into skillet meals.

With so much product moving through BCS, the company developed a comprehensive online inventory system. Some products manufactured by companies outside of Whatcom County are shipped through BCS simply for access to this inventorying capacity. BCS also provides food storage and handling for area food banks and school district free-lunch programs. Some of the value-added companies housed at BCS donate fish to food banks as well.

Dairy

The majority of the milk that is produced in Whatcom County is sold in bulk through Darigold, which has a processing plant in Lynden. This plant focuses on producing dried milk products. Some milk from Whatcom County also travels to plants in other parts of Washington (primarily Seattle and Issaquah) that produce other dairy products, including butter and cream.ⁱⁱ There are currently 5 dairies in Whatcom County that bottle and sell their milk under their own label.ⁱⁱⁱ These are marketed through farm stands, the Bellingham Farmers Market, and local grocery stores. Four farms produce and sell cheese directly from the farm and through grocery stores. With low prices for bulk milk in recent years, some smaller dairies are finding it more profitable to direct-market their products.

Berries

Most berries produced in Whatcom County are processed for export out of the region. Local facilities in Whatcom County process the fruit as individually quick frozen (IQF), puree, juice, juice concentrate, straight pack, or berry blends.

Other Processors^{iv}

Bakeries and cereal producers are the next largest food processors in Whatcom County. Large national companies have bakeries here, such as United States Bakery (Franz breads), but smaller bakery chains and franchises, such as Great Harvest and Flax 4 Life Muffins, also produce for local markets and grocery stores. Several other bakeries sell products directly from local storefronts and at local retail outlets or at farmers markets. The organic cereal producer Nature's Path has a large processing plant in Blaine employing 150 people and sells their products throughout North America. Baker's Breakfast Cookies, located in Bellingham, employs approximately 45 people and produces breakfast cookies and granola that are sold nationwide as well as at the Bellingham Farmers Market.

Wineries are increasing in number in Whatcom County as they are in western Washington as a whole. Two of the larger wineries are Samson Estates Winery and Mt. Baker Vineyards. Both produce some of the fruit for their wines, but also buy fruit from eastern Washington. Beer is produced at several breweries in Whatcom County: Boundary Bay Brewery, Chuckanut Brewery, and North Fork Brewery are the 3 largest. At least one meadery and cidery operates in Whatcom County.

Fairhaven Organic Flour Mill has been in Bellingham since 1974, when it started as a cooperative. It is still owned locally and produces high quality organic flour from grain grown in the western United States.

Five meat and sausage processing facilities are located in Whatcom County. Hempler's Meat and Sausage in Ferndale employs approximately 35 people and produces sausage products for regional markets. Lynden Meat and Kaiser Meats are 2 of the larger meat slaughter and processing facilities.

Historically, several vegetable processing facilities were located in Whatcom County, which allowed these products to be grown and quickly processed for storage. No facilities are currently processing summer grown vegetables. Several facilities are available for processing berry crops into puree, juice, or individually quick frozen products. These are shipped to processors for use as ingredients in final products or packed for consumer use.

Conclusion

Food processing is an important piece of the local and regional food system. The processing infrastructure that supported food production was one of several factors that enabled Whatcom County to make its agricultural output economically viable in a growing global market. Although some of that infrastructure has disappeared—particularly fresh vegetable processing—the local capacity for processing fish and seafood, dairy, and berries still allows for production far in excess of what can be consumed locally and contributes mightily to the county's agricultural economic output.

Since diversified vegetable processing plants left the area, smaller Whatcom County farms are challenged to find fresh market opportunities for mid-scale vegetable production. Without processing capacity for such products, the year-round market for local and regional sales of vegetables is limited—both at retail venues and institutions such as school districts. In the long run, this may be one of the most significant barriers faced by local food advocates and farms interested in localizing their sales. It is a situation that favors small, direct-market farms and much larger production farms selling to large processors operating at scale outside of the community. Several organizations and state agencies are currently studying the feasibility of commercially certified kitchens and processing opportunities centered around vegetable-producing regions of the county. With increasing fuel costs,

planning for agricultural resiliency, and a desire of Whatcom County citizens for locally grown food year round, small- to mid-scale and diversified processing capacity will likely be a significant opportunity for Whatcom County.

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- i Doug Thomas, President and CEO of Bellingham Cold Storage (personal communication) and information from: <http://www.bellcold.com>
- ii Cheryl DeHaan, Whatcom Farm Friends (personal communication).
- iii *Whatcom Food and Farm Finder*. (2010). Retrieved from: <http://sustainableconnections.org/foodfarming/guidetoeatinglocal>
- iv Several sources were used including the Bellingham/Whatcom County phone book and LexisNexis Academic Website.