



A young Jason Marrian in Kenya. Photo By Libba Marrian

Port Jervis Smoked Fish Business Suffused With Smoke and Kenyan Lore

SAMAKI harambee

By James A. Bridge

PORT JERVIS, NY } Samaki, Inc.'s unassuming storefront on Jersey Avenue doesn't reveal a hint of Africa.

But for Simon Marrian, owner of the smoked fish business thriving there, practically everything about it comes from Africa—like its name, which means fish in Swahili. There are also the many memories of Kenya, of growing up on a coffee farm and of high-speed pursuit in the African wild. He would take the business and processes he developed in Kenya here to the U.S., but his path to Port Jervis would first blaze through the grasses of Kenya, chasing down lesser kudu, waterbuck, and gerenuk, scores at a time.

“We caught endangered animals for transportation to a breeding zoo in Prague. I have some amazing photos—one in particular of me in a Toyota Land Cruiser racing after a giraffe, his feet are off the ground, we were moving so fast,” Marrian said.

Simon Marrian was born in Africa, as was his son and partner, Jason. Simon and wife Libba Marrian took four-year-old Jason and his two-year-old sister Keaton to the United States, and they opened Samaki in 1983. Simon brought the business to the city of Port Jervis in 2002. “They basically gave me an offer that was too good to refuse.” When Jason joined the venture, Marrian said, he invigorated it with vision and plans for future growth.

“Jason joined the company 11 years ago, when Libba retired to write. He brought new blood and new ideas, helped increase our product list and as a result, our sales. He has been a breath of fresh air,” Marrian said. Jason brought innovations to the company's labels, advertising,

and marketing, all of which have led to revenue increases. Jason has other talents, Marrian added. “He is a pilot, instrument rated, with his own plane at Wurtsboro Airport, and is a talented designer and maker of unique, one-of-a-kind wood furniture pieces.”

Samaki's current location had once been a butcher shop, and as such was equipped with ample refrigeration space. Jason sees in it a need for growth, and within the existing venture an unexplored frontier. While initially not enamored of his father's trade, over time a unique vision for Samaki took hold. He had great love for making furniture and working with wood. As he labored at his father's side, he began to see how the natural, clean process of his father's design was admirable, and marketable.

“It's a belief in providing a high-quality natural product, and it is as simple as it gets. It is sort of an artisan process,” he said. Couple natural ingredients and the current consciousness about detoxifying our environment and lives, he said, and you have a chance to grab market share. “The last few years Samaki has really started to grow,” he said. The Marrians are planning an expansion to keep up with their mounting demand.

Two brick oven kilns of the Marrians' own design breathed “cold” smoke from a made-to-order wood mix over fish cured in a process that he learned as a young man on the slopes of Mt. Kenya. The perfume of the sweet hardwood mix of beech and oak pervaded Samaki's somewhat cool back office.

How, though, did Samaki translate to Port Jervis, New York, and how was Mr. Marrian tied to Kenya initially?

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Peter Marrian, Simon's father, fell in love with Africa while passing through Kenya during the Second World War. He brought his wife Susie (Morgan) to Kenya, and he purchased a 2,000 acre coffee farm. "It is an area called Mweiga, sort of part of the Aberdare Range, in sight of Mount Kenya," Simon Marrian said.

Simon was born in 1951, and attended private school in Kenya until he was 12. "When I was 13, I was sent to boarding school in Shrewsbury (England). I went there from 1964 to 1969. Then I left Shrewsbury, started studying agriculture, very briefly, started studying economics, left that... it was during this period when I met my wife (to be), Libba. We got married in 1976."

Simon Marrian found his niche selling a gourmet product to people starved for foodstuffs other than local produce. "When we started smoking fish in 1979 we had a sort of captive market. There were a lot of upscale lodges and hotels in Kenya, places like the Mt. Kenya Safari Club, the Ark, the Muthaiga Club, Governors Camp, and Tree Tops. Kenya had a very good supply of fruit and vegetables, but they needed something extra to put on the menu." Marrian purchased tuna, sailfish and marlin from the Indian Ocean fishing fleet, or from the extensive sport fishing community.

He even brought an innovation or two to the smoked fish industry. "I smoked yellow fin tuna in Kenya, because it was readily available in the Indian Ocean. We actually pioneered that product, and became the first smoke house to cold-smoke tuna in the U.S."

Son Jason came in 1978, and daughter Keaton in 1980. And with that new family came a realization that the Africa that was growing up around them wasn't stable enough to build a future on. Wild areas that were once just wild were now wild and dangerous.

"In 1983 my partner bought me out. We had basically decided we wanted to move to the United States." He came to the area because of its proximity to the great marketplace of New York City.

Samaki prepares Eastern Nova, Irish and Atlantic smoked salmon, vodka dill smoked salmon, pastrami salmon, and smoked trout, sable, whitefish and tuna. They also prepare kippered salmon and gravlachs. Their fish comes from Chile, Ireland, Denmark, Norway and Scotland.

The cold-smoke process has several stages. Fish is readied then cured in salt and brown sugar, rinsed and smoked, and then put through the slicer and vacuum-packed for delivery to an impressive array of clientele. Russ & Daughters Appetizing, Barney Greengrass, Citarella, Fairway Markets, Zabar's, Agata and Valentina, Whole Foods, Food Emporium, and Le Pain Quotidien all buy from Samaki.



Photos By Jason Marrian



Photo By Litba Marrian

Samaki's kilns produce a half-ton of fish each, per day, he said. Simon Marrian opened one to show the tall rolling racks layered with pans of white and rosy-colored fish in the center of the dark, smoking space. Eight fans waft smoke constantly over the fish. "We keep it at 80° (Fahrenheit). You don't want it to get too hot," he explained. "It'll change the texture." The process is also very dependent upon the ambient humidity. "If you can suck the humidity out, you can cure it in a much shorter period of time," he said. That time could vary for him from between eight and 12 hours. His process is though about quality. Larger operations focus on rate of production. "Mechanical kilns try to speed up the whole process," he said. They will produce smoked fish at up to half the time as Samaki, but those extra four hours under the Samaki smoking process make a great difference in flavor.

Venture and adventure suffuse the sprawling story of Samaki, that spans thousands of miles and three generations. I asked Simon Marrian if there was a Swahili word that could tie the strings of events that led from England to Kenya and ultimately to Port Jervis. He thought for a time, then found one.

"Harambee," he said, "'bay' at the end. It means like pull together, pulling it all together. ●



(1) Eastern Nova, vodka dill smoked salmon, trout, sable, whitefish and tuna are a few of the delights at Samaki (2) salmon on racks in the kiln (3) Simon Marrian during the early days in Kenya (4) preparing the fish (5) packaged Samaki salmon.