

SMOKED SALMON - PART II

by Darryl Charonzey

SMOKE IT!

"Mmmm good" used to be the way Campbell's described the taste of their variety of soups, but to my way of thinking it's the best term for conveying the succulent reward of smoked game fish.

Smoking is an age-old way of preserving fish, and for many outdoor gourmets it remains the only method.

The first necessity is a smokehouse. A number of excellent commercial units on today's market can handle a hefty catch of upwards of 20 lb. The Luhr Jensen Tackle Co. of Hood River, Ore., manufactures perhaps the most popular, the Little Chief, an aluminum portable that retails for under \$80. Constructed with three trays for the fillets and a small hotplate on the bottom, it's ideal for operations on a sun-deck, apartment balcony, or backyard picnic table.

If you know the finer points of driving a nail or turning a screw, a homemade smokehouse is a cinch. But perhaps the most popular means of building your own is to convert an old ice-box or refrigerator. I've also tasted some mighty fine fish prepared in an overturned wine barrel that had been given a few minor adjustments.

Whether it's a refrigerator, wine barrel, or old wooden box, it's important to have a source of heat that can be held at 160 - 180 F. The heat carrying smoke, most often obtained from slow-smouldering cherry, apple, or hickory shavings, should move up under the fish and be evenly dispersed. If your hotplate is small, apply dry wood in a pan. If it's large, use damp wood because it'll prevent excess heat and flame.

Choosing your fish is easy. Most who catch their own freshwater fish favour trout, especially the bigger fellows carrying plenty of body fat. But don't toss those catfish, eels and suckers back into the drink. In my mind, there's nothing that can be compared to a plump little smoked catfish. And the lowly smelt is a small delicacy that's great for snacks or a full-course meal.

For the salt-water sportsman, it's hard to pass up an offering of coho, chinook, grouper, snapper, or good old east coast cod.

Once you've chosen your fish, you can smoke in fillets or in the round. Fish under three lb. are best left in the whole. All that is required is a thorough gutting, beheading, and scraping of the kidney.

Big fish are best smoked in fillets or, in the case of true giants, laid on the smoke-house racks in the form of fish steaks.

Before being offered to the smokehouse, all fish should be immersed in brine, which kills bacteria, prolongs storage life, and gives the fish additional flavour.

My favourite brine contains 1/2 gallon of water, 1/2 gallon of apple juice, 1 cup of pickling salt and 1 cup of brown sugar. Depending on how salty you like your fish, the fillets or steaks can be left in the solution for upwards of eight hours. Then I give the fish a quick rinse under the tap. Placing them on paper towelling, I administer a light dusting with black pepper and a little white sugar, and allow them to dry until tacky. This same brine can have light rum instead of the 1/2 gallon of water.

In my Little Chief smoker, medium sized chunks of trout and salmon smoke for upwards of eight hours. With some of the larger home-made models, fish is best retrieved after four hours. The length of time also depends on your taste buds. Some of my buddies go batty for trout and even carp that have been in the smoker for only a short while and are still moist and juicy, but I prefer the drier, textured product that has a more smoky flavour.

These basic points should get you past the first three or four fish-smoking ventures and most companies that sell custom smoke-houses also throw in a cookbook. A number of publications, such as McLane's new England Fishing Encyclopedia and Frances MacIlquaham's Canadian Game Cookery published by McClelland and Stewart, can provide more than the basics for excellent results.

There is one problem. If your fame spreads, be prepared for a multitude of buddies to drop by with a bundle of fresh fillets or steaks with scales that they just happen to have.